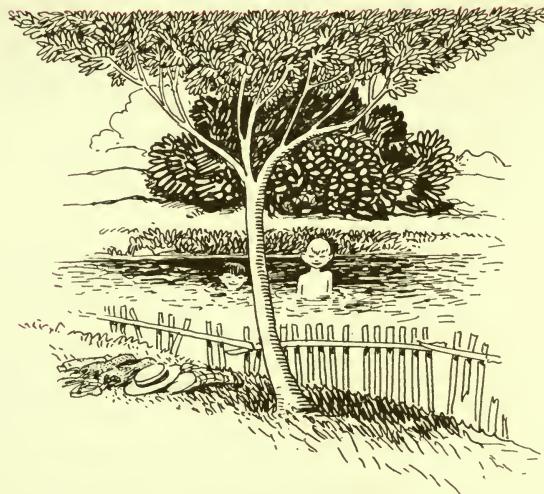


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James Whitcomb Riley In Prose and Picture



By John A. Howland
Decorations by



Chicago
HANDY & HIGGINS
1903



LOAN STACK

GIFT

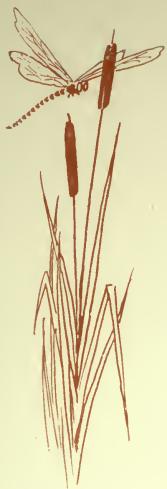
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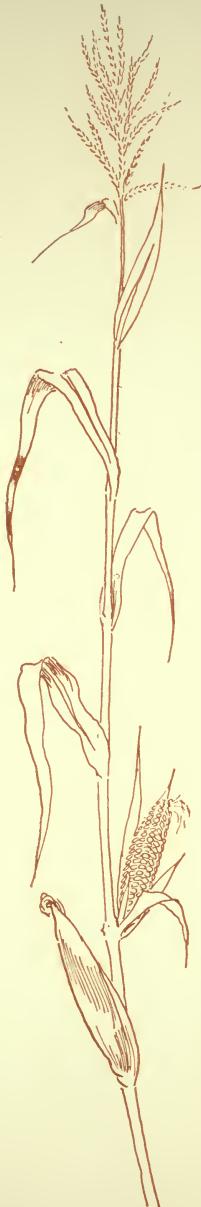
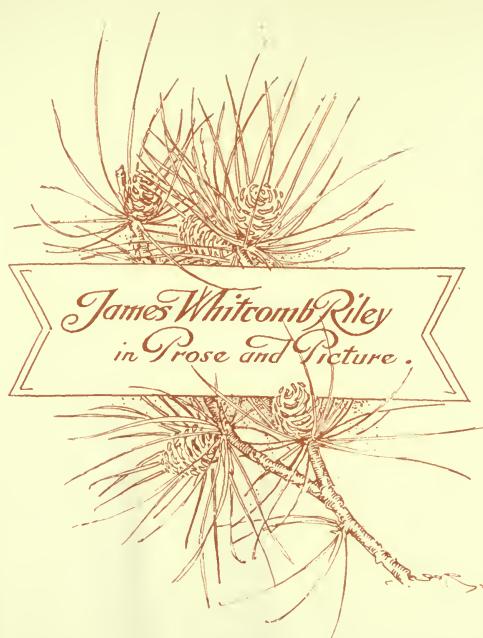






"And there's the corn around us, and the
lispin' leaves and trees."









“And it mottled the water with amber
and gold.”



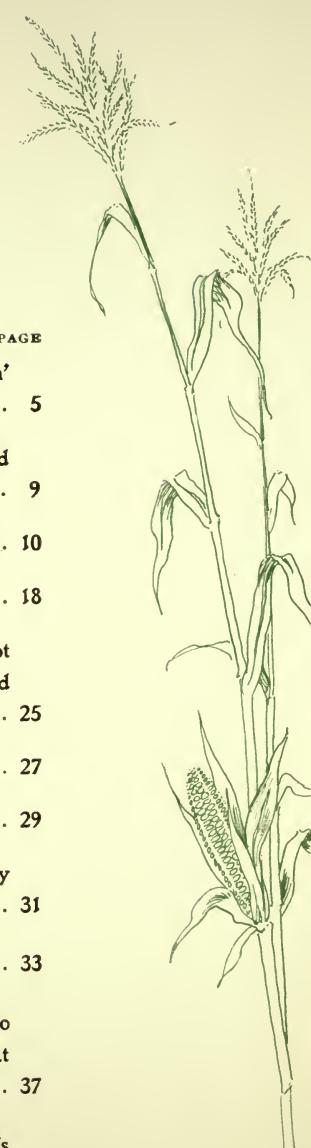
The Brightest Star's the modestest,
And more'n likely writes
His motto like the lightning-bug's—
Accordin' To His Lights.
Very truly your friend,
- James Whitcomb Riley.

FAC-SIMILE OF A STANZA IN RILEY'S HANDWRITING.

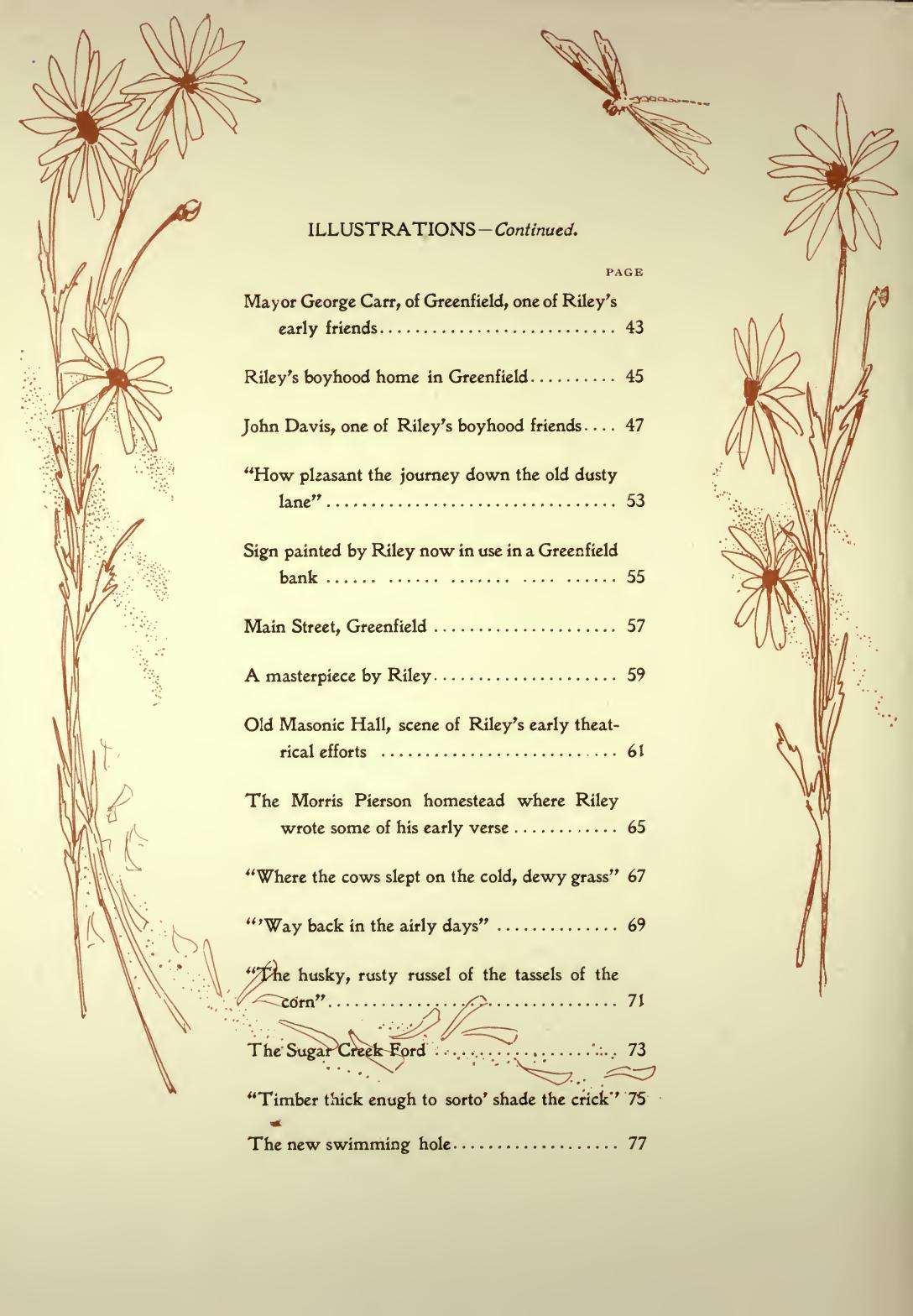




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A bit of Greenfield.



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A Welcome to Riley

Jim Riley—he's a-comin' to Atlanta, so they say,
An' we hear our hearts a-hummin' as they meet
him on the way;
For who ain't heard o' Riley—Jim Riley o' the
West,
An' loved his song until they long to tell him
"He's the best!"

When a feller gets to readin' him, it's half a laugh
an' sigh,
A-heavin' o' the heartstrings, an' a-waterin' o' the
eye;
An' you dream in velvet valleys, an' you wade in
dewy grass,
While your soul takes in the twanglin' of the
doves' wings as they pass.

The world takes on more color; the springtime is
more sweet,
An' the dear "old-fashioned roses" seem to blos-
som at your feet;
An' you hear the farm boy singin' at the ox-team
that he drives.
While the buzzin' bees are bringin' all the honey to
the hives!

So, let him come—Jim Riley, an' let him take this
song
Of one he knows, a wind-blown rose from them
who've loved him long;
Jes' take it as a welcome, an' wear it in his breast
Until we look him in the face an' tell him "He's
the best!"

—Frank L. Stanton.





Riley: the Poet and Man

JHE unhappy subject of this sketch was born so long ago that he persists in never referring to the date. Citizens of his native town of Greenfield, Ind., while warmly welcoming his advent, were no less demonstrative some few years since to 'speed the parting guest.' It seems in fact that as they came to know him better the more resigned they were to give him up. He was ill-starred from the cradle, it appears. One day while but a toddler he climbed, unseen, to an open window where some potted flowers were ranged and while leaning from his high chair far out to catch some dainty gilded butterfly, perchance, he lost his foothold and with a piercing shriek, fell headlong to the gravelled walk below and when, an instant later, the affrighted parents picked him up—he was a poet."

In this humorous, characteristic paragraph James Whitcomb Riley has de-



scribed himself. Like most men who undertake their own lives in a sentence, he has sacrificed a few truths for the sake of humor—a not astounding circumstance in the case of Riley who refused to look on life as a serious struggle.

“Unhappy” he has not been. “Ill-starred” he certainly was not. Greenfield, far from “speeding the parting guest” has proven false the declaration concerning the prophet and his own country. He never has been given up. He has no more sincere admirers, no warmer friends than the citizens of his native town.

Yet in this paragraph one may see a bit reflecting the irresponsibility of his early life; of the instability, which prevented him from becoming a village tradesman because he was to be a great poet; of the humor which rivals the pathos in his poems.

If James Whitcomb Riley had not been intended to be a poet who should



“The bridge of the railroad now covers the spot
“Where the old divin’-log lays lunk and forgot.”



reach the hearts of men, he probably would have been the good natured village grocery wit whose stories held sympathetic audiences through long winter evenings, whose sayings would have been repeated with laughter by his towns people, whose happy, shiftless life would have caused many wiseacres to shake their heads and say:

"If Jim Riley'd only work he'd make his mark, but you can't get him to work."

He might have been the soft hearted Rip Van Winkle of a little Indiana town, a man whose efforts were ready in behalf of a friend and slothful for self interest; the man about whom the children would cluster and concerning whom the housewives would shake their heads.

After his successful poems had placed him in the front rank of American poets who find their themes in the lives of the humble there arose many to declare that what was gained by poetry was lost by the stage; that James Whitcomb Riley would have put his name alongside



Riley's home in Greentield.

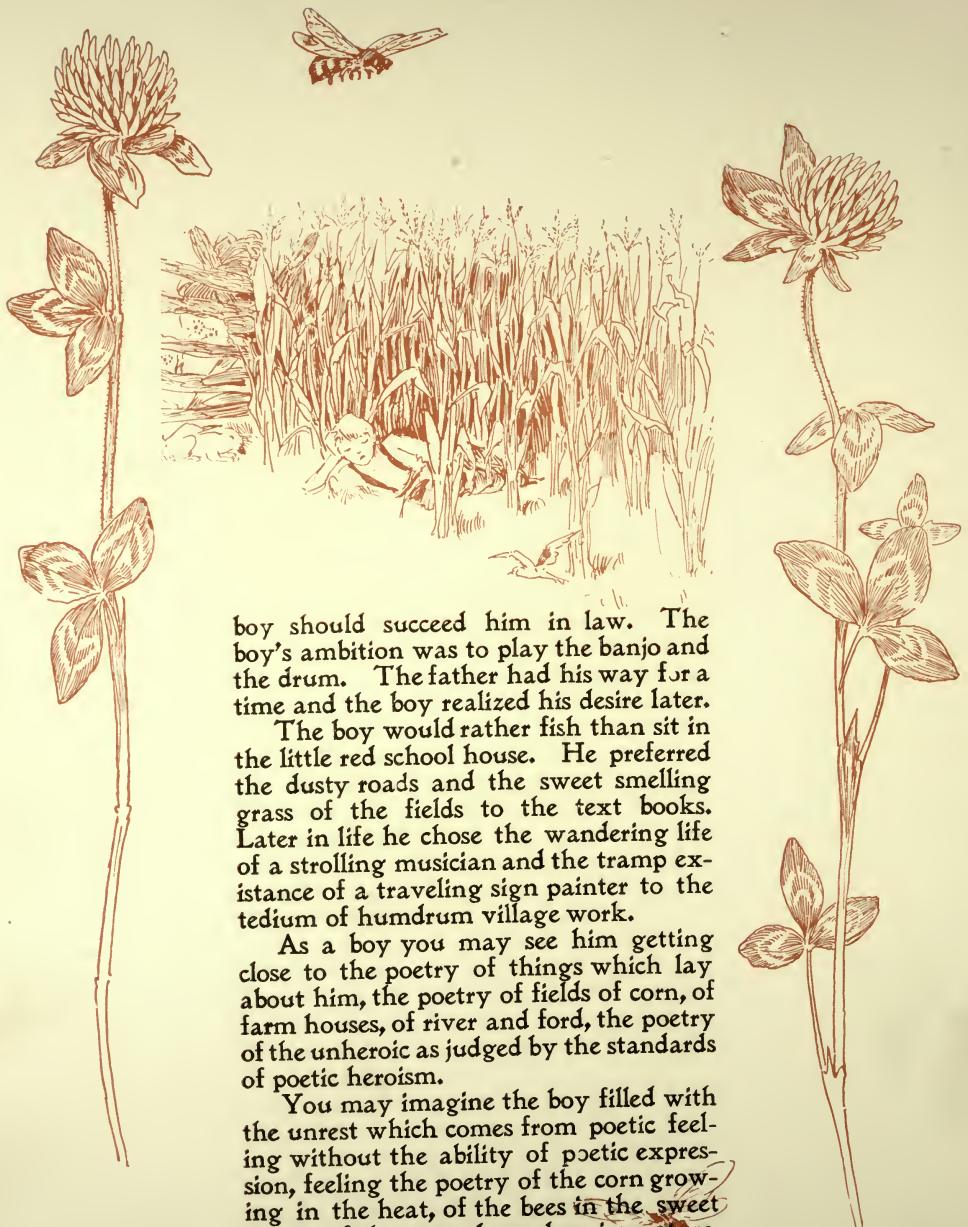
Booth's if he had not written it with Longfellow's.

This, however, was a discovery made after the poet had attained his mark of fame. Every circumstance of his early life pointed to a career of unprofitable, unstable, kindly, joyous local brilliance.

Fate had marked Riley as a poet. Circumstance was endeavoring to make him fit in the business life of a small country town. And he wouldn't fit. Accordingly he appeared as unstable.

He was the son of erratic father, if local tradition may be accepted as trustworthy. Reuben Riley was a brilliant lawyer, but it is still said of him that any time he "would leave a law suit to carve an ax handle." Riley's mother was not a strong woman physically and had the care of five children.

The father's ambition was that the



boy should succeed him in law. The boy's ambition was to play the banjo and the drum. The father had his way for a time and the boy realized his desire later.

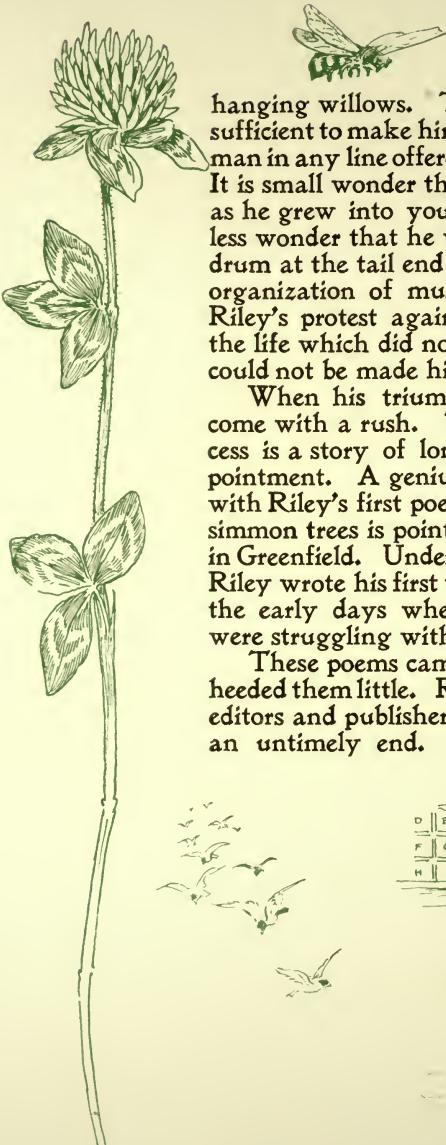
The boy would rather fish than sit in the little red school house. He preferred the dusty roads and the sweet smelling grass of the fields to the text books. Later in life he chose the wandering life of a strolling musician and the tramp existance of a traveling sign painter to the tedium of humdrum village work.

As a boy you may see him getting close to the poetry of things which lay about him, the poetry of fields of corn, of farm houses, of river and ford, the poetry of the unheroic as judged by the standards of poetic heroism.

You may imagine the boy filled with the unrest which comes from poetic feeling without the ability of poetic expression, feeling the poetry of the corn growing in the heat, of the bees in the sweet clover, of the cows knee deep in pasture, of the river cool in the shade, of over



“There the bull rushes growed.”



hanging willows. This unrest would be sufficient to make him unstable as a workman in any line offered by the small town. It is small wonder that he worked fitfully as he grew into young manhood. It is less wonder that he was found beating a drum at the tail end of a medicine seller's organization of musicians. It was just Riley's protest against being fitted into the life which did not belong to him and could not be made his.

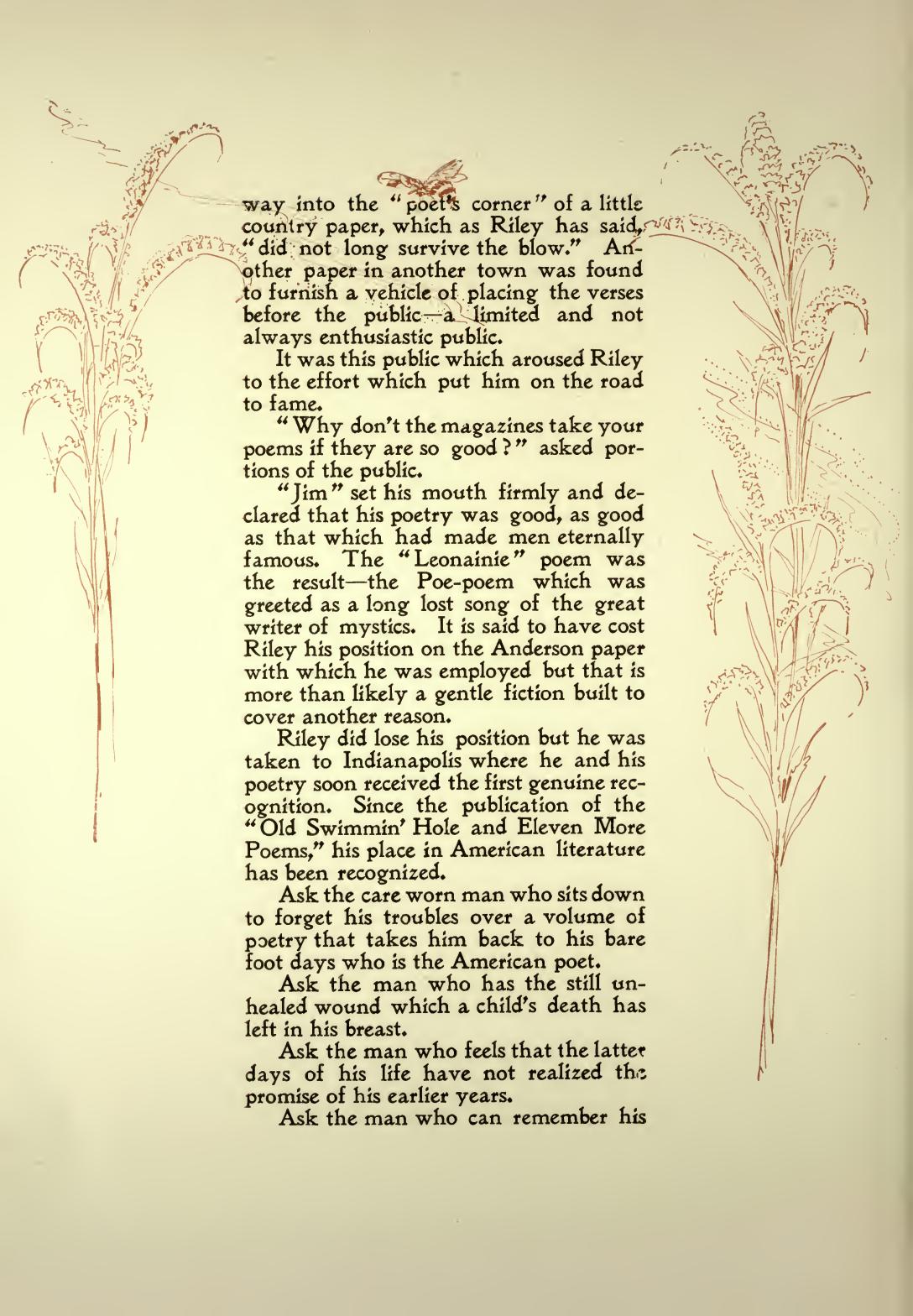
When his triumph came it did not come with a rush. The story of his success is a story of long effort and disappointment. A genius was not discovered with Riley's first poem. A group of persimmon trees is pointed out to the visitor in Greenfield. Under these trees, it is said, Riley wrote his first verses. That was in the early days when efforts to express were struggling with feeling.

These poems came into a world which heeded them little. Rejected by magazine editors and publishers some of them met an untimely end. Others found their





“ Green woods and clear skies
“ And unwrit poetry by the cave.”



way into the "poet's corner" of a little country paper, which as Riley has said, "did not long survive the blow." Another paper in another town was found to furnish a vehicle of placing the verses before the public—a limited and not always enthusiastic public.

It was this public which aroused Riley to the effort which put him on the road to fame.

"Why don't the magazines take your poems if they are so good?" asked portions of the public.

"Jim" set his mouth firmly and declared that his poetry was good, as good as that which had made men eternally famous. The "Leonainie" poem was the result—the Poe-poem which was greeted as a long lost song of the great writer of mystics. It is said to have cost Riley his position on the Anderson paper with which he was employed but that is more than likely a gentle fiction built to cover another reason.

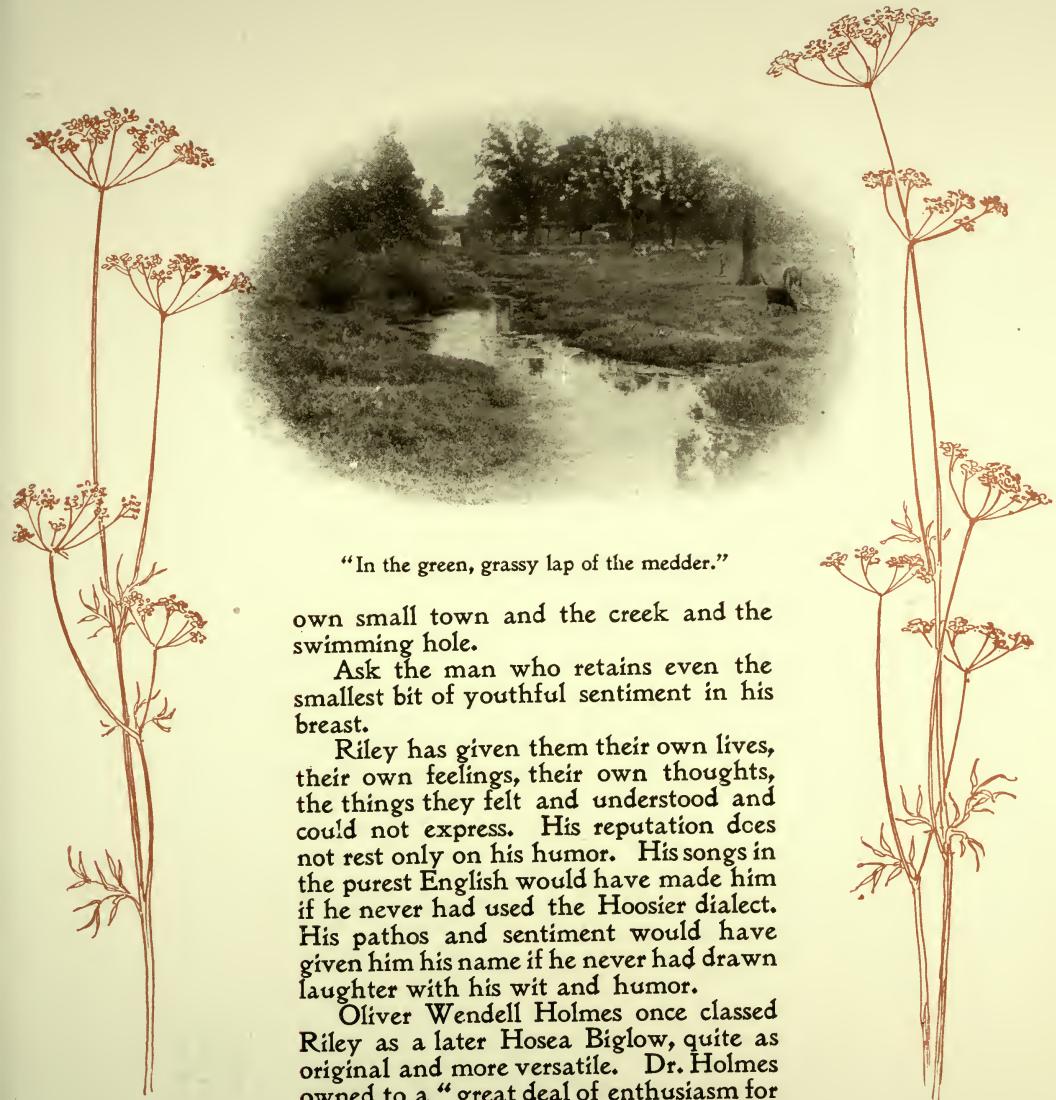
Riley did lose his position but he was taken to Indianapolis where he and his poetry soon received the first genuine recognition. Since the publication of the "Old Swimmin' Hole and Eleven More Poems," his place in American literature has been recognized.

Ask the care worn man who sits down to forget his troubles over a volume of poetry that takes him back to his bare foot days who is the American poet.

Ask the man who has the still unhealed wound which a child's death has left in his breast.

Ask the man who feels that the latter days of his life have not realized the promise of his earlier years.

Ask the man who can remember his



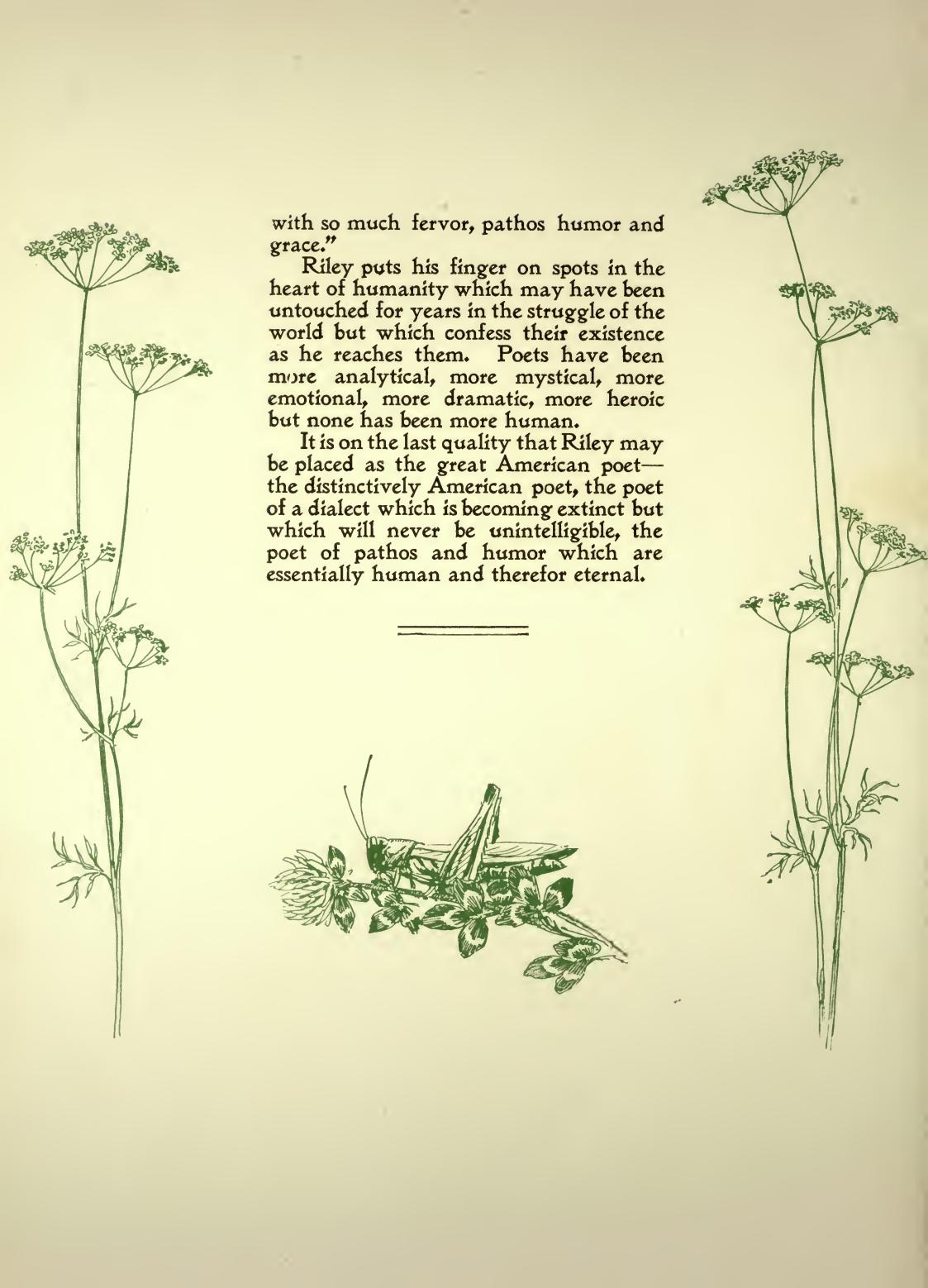
"In the green, grassy lap of the medder."

own small town and the creek and the swimming hole.

Ask the man who retains even the smallest bit of youthful sentiment in his breast.

Riley has given them their own lives, their own feelings, their own thoughts, the things they felt and understood and could not express. His reputation does not rest only on his humor. His songs in the purest English would have made him if he never had used the Hoosier dialect. His pathos and sentiment would have given him his name if he never had drawn laughter with his wit and humor.

Oliver Wendell Holmes once classed Riley as a later Hosea Biglow, quite as original and more versatile. Dr. Holmes owned to a "great deal of enthusiasm for this later production of Indiana soil, this delineator of lowly humanity, who sings



with so much fervor, pathos humor and grace."

Riley puts his finger on spots in the heart of humanity which may have been untouched for years in the struggle of the world but which confess their existence as he reaches them. Poets have been more analytical, more mystical, more emotional, more dramatic, more heroic but none has been more human.

It is on the last quality that Riley may be placed as the great American poet—the distinctively American poet, the poet of a dialect which is becoming extinct but which will never be unintelligible, the poet of pathos and humor which are essentially human and therefor eternal.



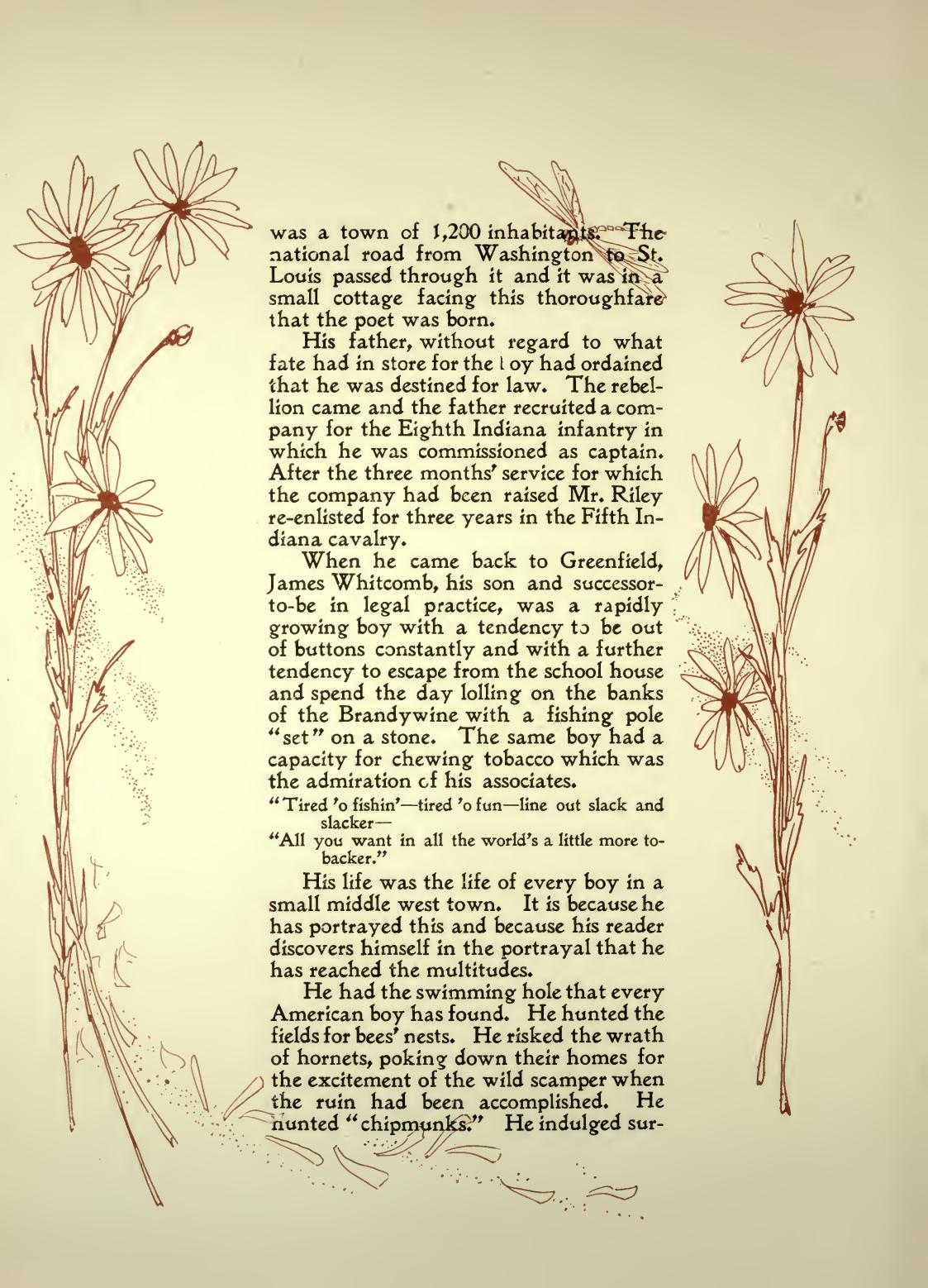


“As us boys ust to be.”

REW poets have been so essentially local as Riley in subjects and treatment. Burns was and that fact may account for the frequent comparison of one man with the other. Few poets have reflected their early lives, surroundings and associates so completely as the Indiana writer.

Riley was born in Greenfield, Indiana, in 1852, the second son of Reuben A. Riley, an attorney. His parents gave him the name of James Whitcomb which the townspeople changed to “Jim,” soon as the tow headed boy appeared on the streets of the small town and became known.

At this time it was a small village. At the time of Riley's young manhood it



was a town of 1,200 inhabitants. The national road from Washington to St. Louis passed through it and it was in a small cottage facing this thoroughfare that the poet was born.

His father, without regard to what fate had in store for the boy had ordained that he was destined for law. The rebellion came and the father recruited a company for the Eighth Indiana infantry in which he was commissioned as captain. After the three months' service for which the company had been raised Mr. Riley re-enlisted for three years in the Fifth Indiana cavalry.

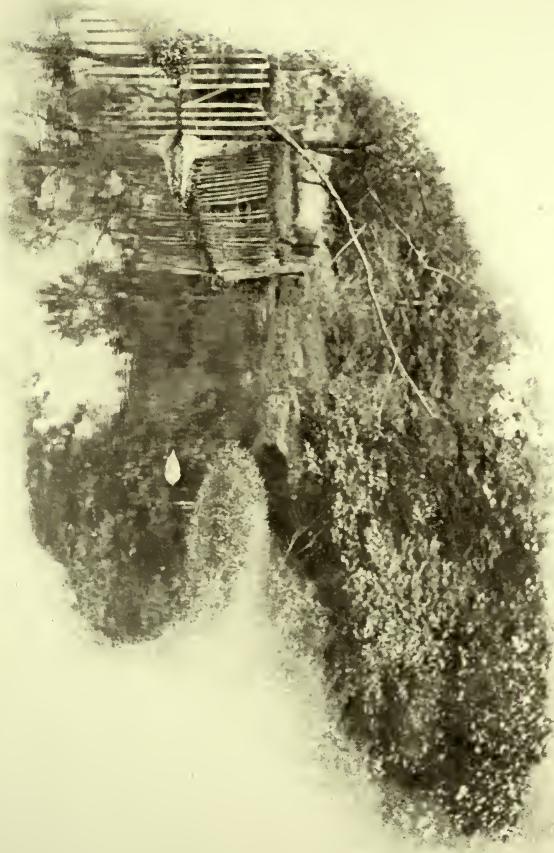
When he came back to Greenfield, James Whitcomb, his son and successor-to-be in legal practice, was a rapidly growing boy with a tendency to be out of buttons constantly and with a further tendency to escape from the school house and spend the day lolling on the banks of the Brandywine with a fishing pole "set" on a stone. The same boy had a capacity for chewing tobacco which was the admiration of his associates.

"Tired 'o fishin'—tired 'o fun—line out slack and slacker—

"All you want in all the world's a little more to-backer."

His life was the life of every boy in a small middle west town. It is because he has portrayed this and because his reader discovers himself in the portrayal that he has reached the multitudes.

He had the swimming hole that every American boy has found. He hunted the fields for bees' nests. He risked the wrath of hornets, poking down their homes for the excitement of the wild scamper when the ruin had been accomplished. He hunted "chipmunks." He indulged sur-



THE OLD SWIMMIN' HOLLE.

“When the crick so still and deep
“Looked like a baby river that was lying half
asleep.”



reptitiously in the joys of corn silk cigarettes. He raided orchards.

He was a small tow headed boy, with, as has been said, few buttons and many pins to hold his clothes together. There is a legend prevailing in Greenfield which jars the swimming hole devotion which Riley is supposed to have nourished. It is related that the boy seldom went in the water with the other youngsters, but preferred to sit on the bank of the Brandywine and watch their antics in the water.

The mother of a Greenfield hopeful, receiving her son one evening when his hair still was wet from the swimming hole, noticed that Jim evidently had not been in the water.

"Jim," she said, "Why don't you go in swimming with the other boys?"

"Well, I'll tell you," said the boy slowly, "I ain't got many buttons on my clothes and I'm ashamed to take out all these pins when the other boys is looking."

That story, no doubt, is apocryphal. His mother was burdened with many

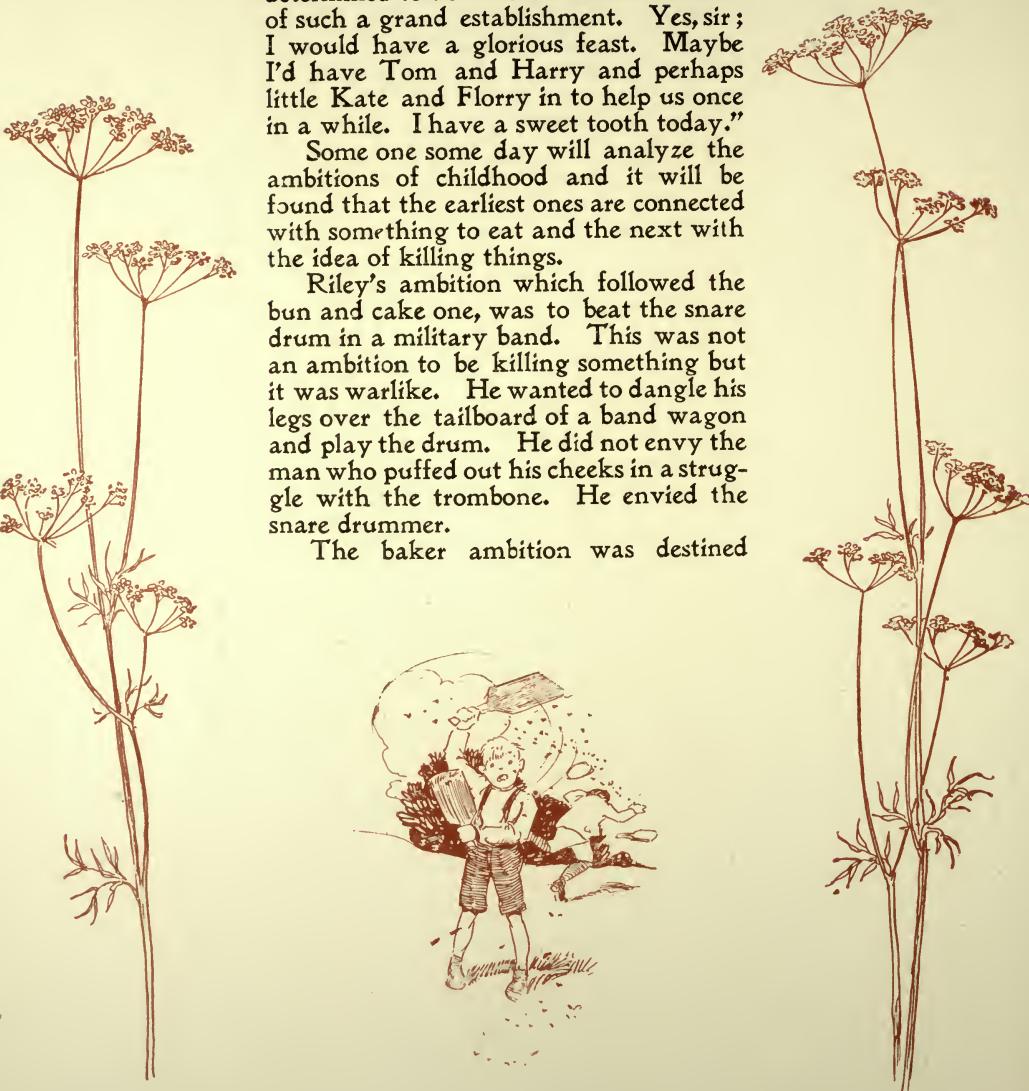


cares, but it is doubtful if she neglected "Jim's" buttons.

Whether Riley was or was not a devotee of the swimming hole is an immaterial matter. He caught the spirit of it at least. Greenfield now relates this old-time conversation with the idea of showing that Riley had more than the average boy's abandon in matters of dress.

It would have been disconcerting to the father if he had known his son's ambitions. Instead of longing for legal fame Jim wanted to be a baker. That was his first feverish ambition.

"That seemed to my childish mind to be the acme of delight," he said on one occasion, "to be able to manufacture those snowy loaves of bread, those delicious tarts, those toothsome bonbons. And then to own them all, to keep them in a store, to watch over them and carefully exhibit them. The thought of obtaining money from the sale of them was a sacrilege to me. Sell them? No indeed. Eat them; eat them by the tray load and dray load. It was a great wonder with me why the pale faced baker in our town



did not eat all his good things. This I determined to do when I became master of such a grand establishment. Yes, sir; I would have a glorious feast. Maybe I'd have Tom and Harry and perhaps little Kate and Florry in to help us once in a while. I have a sweet tooth today."

Some one some day will analyze the ambitions of childhood and it will be found that the earliest ones are connected with something to eat and the next with the idea of killing things.

Riley's ambition which followed the bun and cake one, was to beat the snare drum in a military band. This was not an ambition to be killing something but it was warlike. He wanted to dangle his legs over the tailboard of a band wagon and play the drum. He did not envy the man who puffed out his cheeks in a struggle with the trombone. He envied the snare drummer.

The baker ambition was destined





THE NEW GENERATION IN GREEN-FIELD.

“They's room for the children to play and to grow.”



never to be realized. The snare drum, however, did enter into Riley's life later in years. He had other dreams. He wanted to be a showman—the man who drove ahead of the circus parade in a little wagon. If he should fail in this ambition he wanted to be the man who drove the horses of the lion's cage. If possible, he wanted to own the golden chariots, the big tents, the beautiful horses for the beautiful princesses and the red lemonade which the circus men sold.

Then again, if fortune failed him and he could not be the man who owned the circus or the man who drove the lion's wagon he wanted to be a clown or a bare-back rider. He would be the funniest clown that ever lived.

There was a result to this dream. He, with George Carr, now Mayor of Greenfield, organized a theatrical troupe and gave matinee performances in the "Doc" Hall barn. The admission was twenty-five pins and Riley was extremely cautious about the box office receipts.

Mayor Carr declares that if a boy ap-



MAYOR GEORGE CARR,
of Greenfield.
One of Riley's early friends.



plied for admission with twenty-four straight pins, and one bent one Riley immediately sent him home for a straight one in place of the crooked.

"Riley said they couldn't work off any bad money on him," said Mr. Carr.

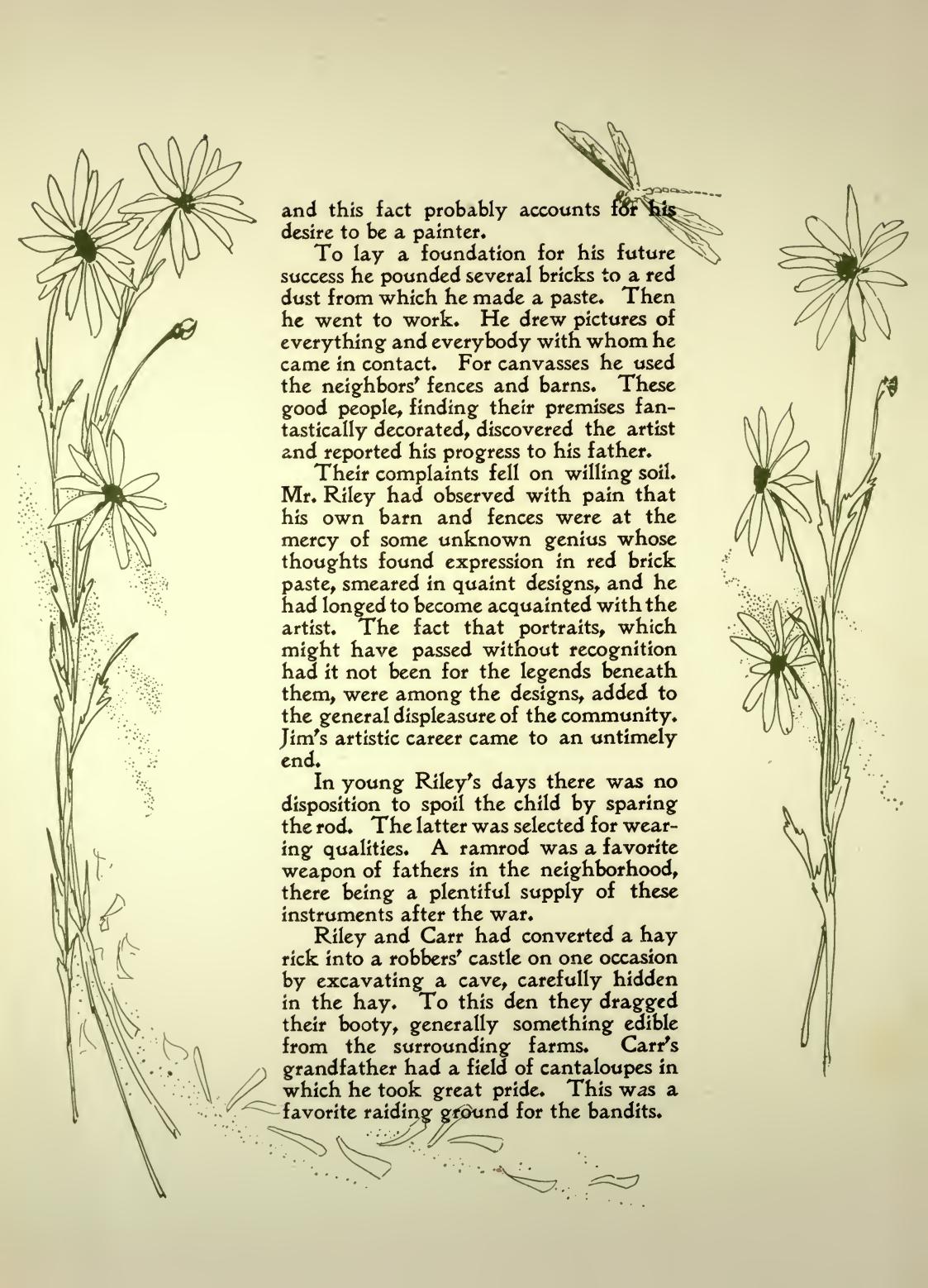
These performances were highly successful both from a financial and an artistic viewpoint. Riley had a bent towards the stage, which was gratified amateurishly later in life, and his youthful show career was phenomenal.

At the close of the season the treasury was found to contain three quarts of pins. Another partner having been taken in the show business these pins were divided equally and the company disbanded.

After the circus ambition had faded away with the baker dream, Riley decided to become a great artist. He would be modest at first. House painting would afford a start and after that he would paint portraits. An uncle was an artist



Riley's boyhood home in Greenfield.



and this fact probably accounts for his desire to be a painter.

To lay a foundation for his future success he pounded several bricks to a red dust from which he made a paste. Then he went to work. He drew pictures of everything and everybody with whom he came in contact. For canvasses he used the neighbors' fences and barns. These good people, finding their premises fantastically decorated, discovered the artist and reported his progress to his father.

Their complaints fell on willing soil. Mr. Riley had observed with pain that his own barn and fences were at the mercy of some unknown genius whose thoughts found expression in red brick paste, smeared in quaint designs, and he had longed to become acquainted with the artist. The fact that portraits, which might have passed without recognition had it not been for the legends beneath them, were among the designs, added to the general displeasure of the community. Jim's artistic career came to an untimely end.

In young Riley's days there was no disposition to spoil the child by sparing the rod. The latter was selected for wearing qualities. A ramrod was a favorite weapon of fathers in the neighborhood, there being a plentiful supply of these instruments after the war.

Riley and Carr had converted a hay rick into a robbers' castle on one occasion by excavating a cave, carefully hidden in the hay. To this den they dragged their booty, generally something edible from the surrounding farms. Carr's grandfather had a field of cantaloupes in which he took great pride. This was a favorite raiding ground for the bandits.



JOHN DAVIS,
One of Riley's boyhood friends.



One afternoon the two had just hidden themselves in their cave with their arms full of melons when they heard a dreaded voice, calling:

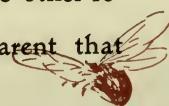
"George, George."

The tone was stern and forbidding. Riley arose to the occasion with a bit of strategy.

"You stay in here," he whispered to Carr. "Maybe he only saw me. I'll get out and dig and you can stay till he goes away."

The unsuspecting Carr consented to this arrangement. Riley prepared for a dash for liberty. Mr. Carr, the elder, ramrod ready, was guarding the opening to the rick. As Riley scampered out he received one cut which raised a welt. Carr was left to face the music, alone and unsupported. While the other bandit raced across the fields at an accelerated pace, Grandfather Carr reached within the rick and dragged forth the other reluctant highwayman.

Thereupon it became apparent that

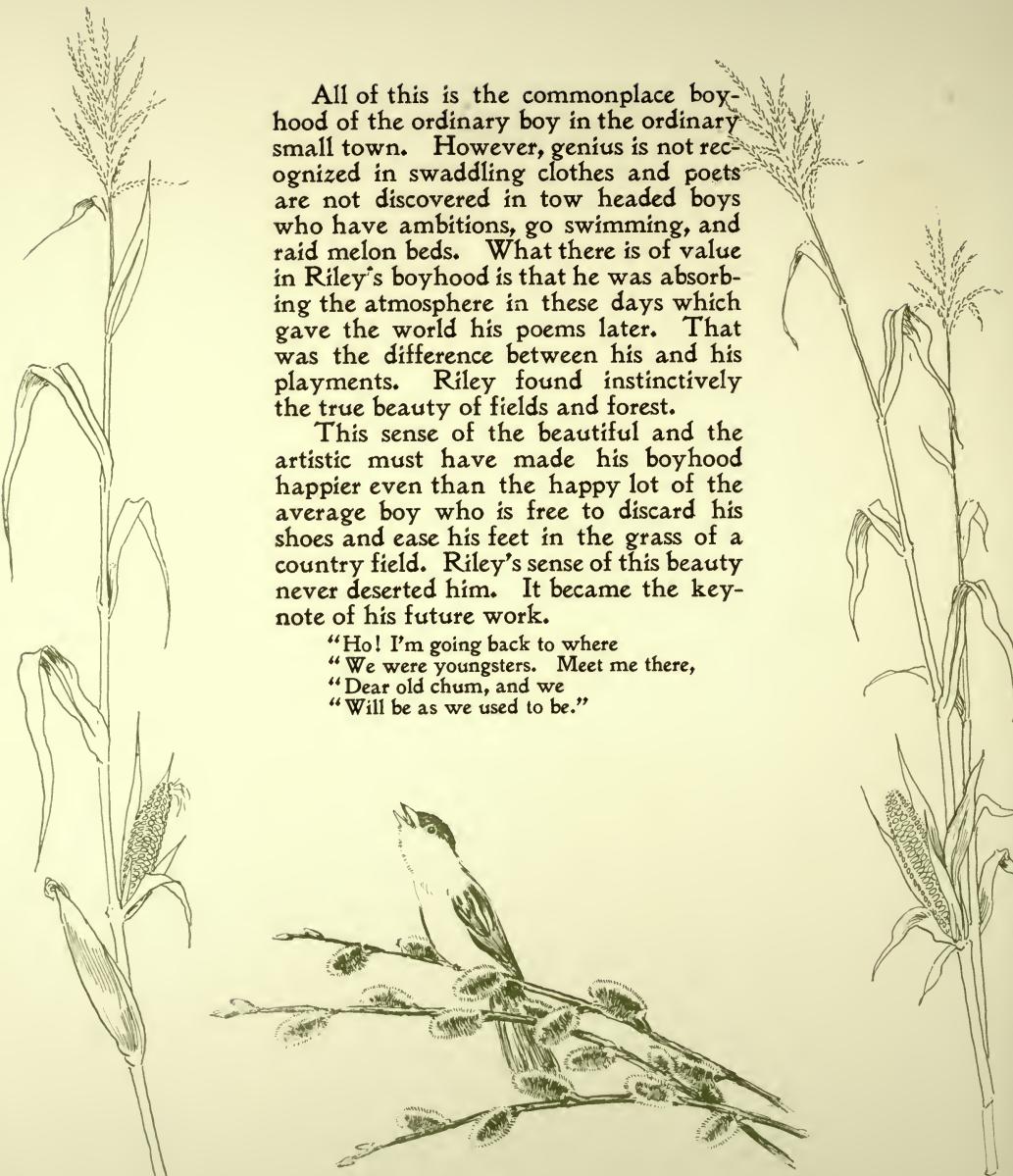




Riley had chosen the part of wisdom in making the first dash for freedom. The second victim remained to sustain the burden of the punishment.

There was little in Riley's boyhood to make it different from the lives of his chums—little if anything. What there was to mark him as unlike the others was not thought to be to his advantage. He quit school altogether at the age of fifteen.

One of his first teachers, Lee O. Harris, himself a writer of verses, has declared that the poet's old text books will show that not all of his time in school was given to study. Their margins and fly leaves were covered with the figures drawn to illustrate the visions which filled his head. His teachers have admitted their inability to guide the boy peacefully in mathematics and grammar. It was his voracious reading in after life that equipped Riley with essentials he failed to grasp in his schooling.



All of this is the commonplace boyhood of the ordinary boy in the ordinary small town. However, genius is not recognized in swaddling clothes and poets are not discovered in tow headed boys who have ambitions, go swimming, and raid melon beds. What there is of value in Riley's boyhood is that he was absorbing the atmosphere in these days which gave the world his poems later. That was the difference between his and his playments. Riley found instinctively the true beauty of fields and forest.

This sense of the beautiful and the artistic must have made his boyhood happier even than the happy lot of the average boy who is free to discard his shoes and ease his feet in the grass of a country field. Riley's sense of this beauty never deserted him. It became the keynote of his future work.

"Ho! I'm going back to where
"We were youngsters. Meet me there,
"Dear old chum, and we
"Will be as we used to be."

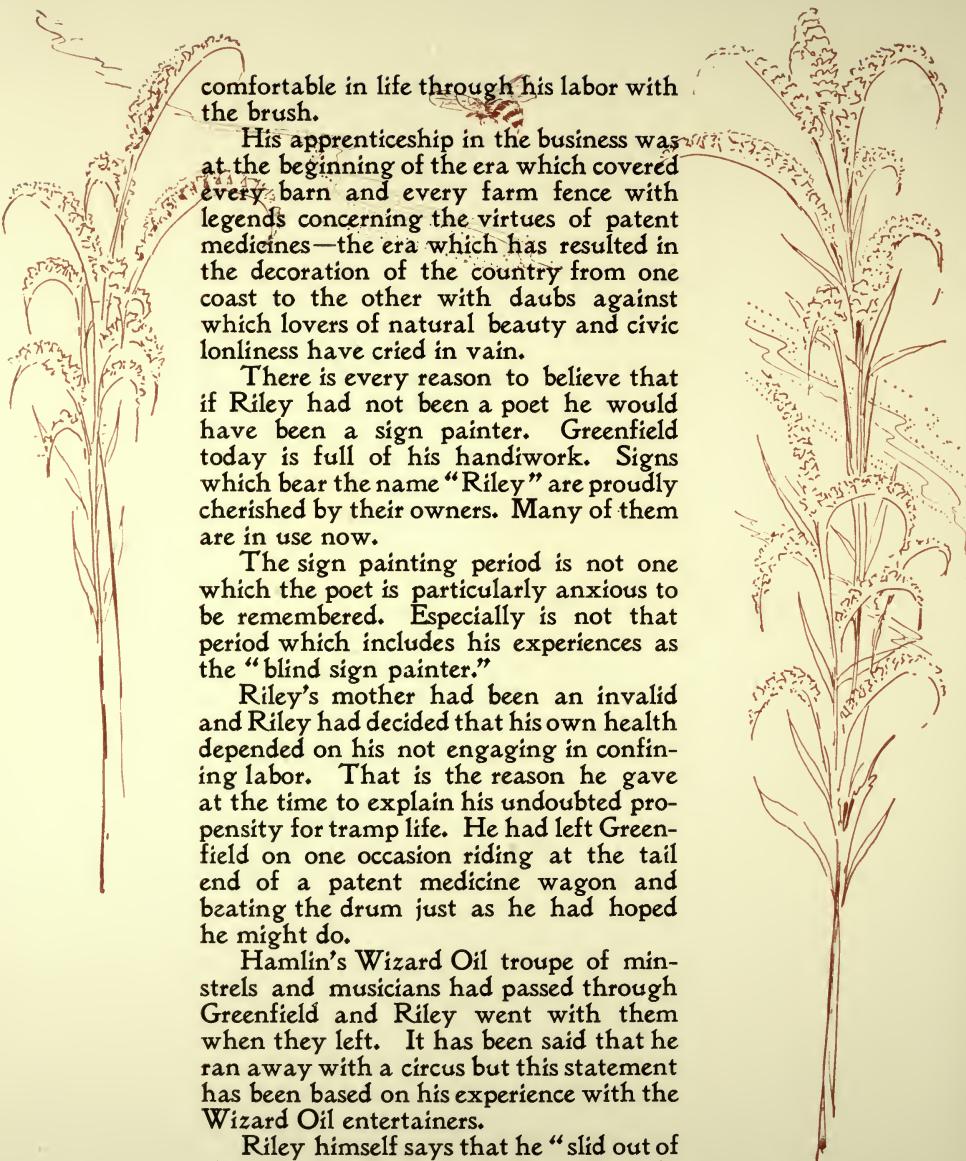




“I'd ruther work when I
wanted to than be
bossed round by
others.”

AS Riley grew to manhood it would have puzzled his friends to name his probable occupation later in life. He had realized one of his ambitions. He could beat the drum and play the banjo. He was well started towards the realization of another. He could paint signs. He had been writing verses, as will be told later, but it is doubtful if even he saw a livelihood in that art just at that time.

From association with John Keefer, a painter in Greenfield, Riley had learned to paint advertising signs. The young man might have continued in this occupation and might have made himself



comfortable in life through his labor with the brush.

His apprenticeship in the business was at the beginning of the era which covered every barn and every farm fence with legends concerning the virtues of patent medicines—the era which has resulted in the decoration of the country from one coast to the other with daubs against which lovers of natural beauty and civic loneliness have cried in vain.

There is every reason to believe that if Riley had not been a poet he would have been a sign painter. Greenfield today is full of his handiwork. Signs which bear the name "Riley" are proudly cherished by their owners. Many of them are in use now.

The sign painting period is not one which the poet is particularly anxious to be remembered. Especially is not that period which includes his experiences as the "blind sign painter."

Riley's mother had been an invalid and Riley had decided that his own health depended on his not engaging in confining labor. That is the reason he gave at the time to explain his undoubtedly propensity for tramp life. He had left Greenfield on one occasion riding at the tail end of a patent medicine wagon and beating the drum just as he had hoped he might do.

Hamlin's Wizard Oil troupe of minstrels and musicians had passed through Greenfield and Riley went with them when they left. It has been said that he ran away with a circus but this statement has been based on his experience with the Wizard Oil entertainers.

Riley himself says that he "slid out of the office" to leave with the minstrels. Whether this is to be construed into a



“How pleasant the journey down the old dusty
lane.”



runaway is left to the reader. At the time he was in the midst of the conflict between his own desire not to read law and his father's desire that he should. He left an open Blackstone when he deserted the law office for the drum at the tail end of the minstrel wagon.

It is undoubtedly true that Riley enjoyed the life with these traveling musicians. He was with them one season. As he says he staid with the band "until all the county fairs were over. Then he found himself in a strange state among strangers and he thought it would be fine to pay a flying visit home. But he couldn't fly."

He managed to accomplish the return home and soon afterwards another opportunity for a roving life was presented, this being connected with the sign painting industry. Of his own ability in this art Riley has said, referring to himself in the third person.

"He could paint a sign—or a house—or a tin roof—if some one else would fur-



Sign painted by Riley now in use in a Greenfield bank.

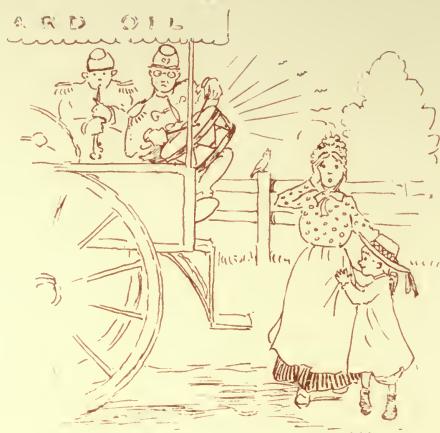
nish him with the paint—and one of Riley's hand-painted fences was a rapture to the most exacting eye."

In this budding industry James McClannahan was one of the brightest stars. We have Riley's word for this and the young man acquired his admiration in two seasons of tramping with the advertising genius.

The "blind sign painter" episode is explained in the following manner, although Riley in submitting to interviews on the subject of his life's exploits has referred to the matter but seldom.

McClannahan decided that if some novelty could be introduced in the sign painting line business would soon be rushing towards the inventors of it. He hit on the expedient of having the painting done by a blind man and Riley was to furnish the blindness.

With a couple of ladders, their paint pots and brushes and other apparatus the two set forth in a wagon for a tour of In-



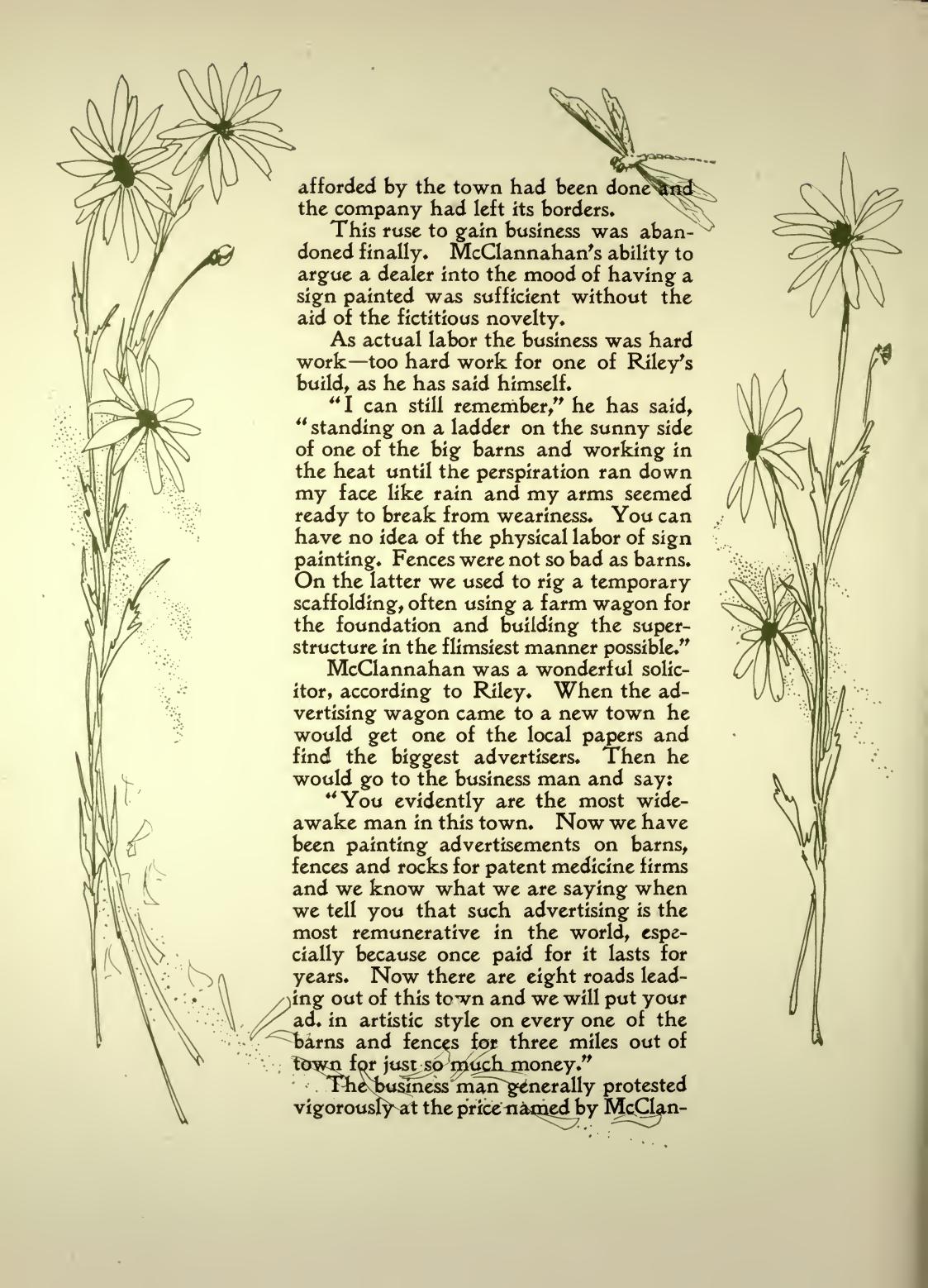
diana, Michigan and other nearby states. When a small town was reached McClanahan descended to dicker with the merchants, explaining the value of having a sign neatly done at the front of their stores by a painter who could not see. By the time the arrangements had been made the word had spread abroad that the quiet young man sitting on the ladders in the wagon could not see but could paint signs without sight.

An agreement having been reached, the ladders would be placed for the painter and Riley, practicing every manifestation of blindness that he knew, would carefully ascend, and with elaborate manipulation, mark off the spaces he intended his letters to occupy. A crowd of several hundred would be collected by this time to watch the progress of the blind sign painter.

In the due course of time the work would be done, to the admiration of the assemblage. Riley preserved the semblance of blindness until all the business



Main Street, Greenfield.



afforded by the town had been done and the company had left its borders.

This ruse to gain business was abandoned finally. McClannahan's ability to argue a dealer into the mood of having a sign painted was sufficient without the aid of the fictitious novelty.

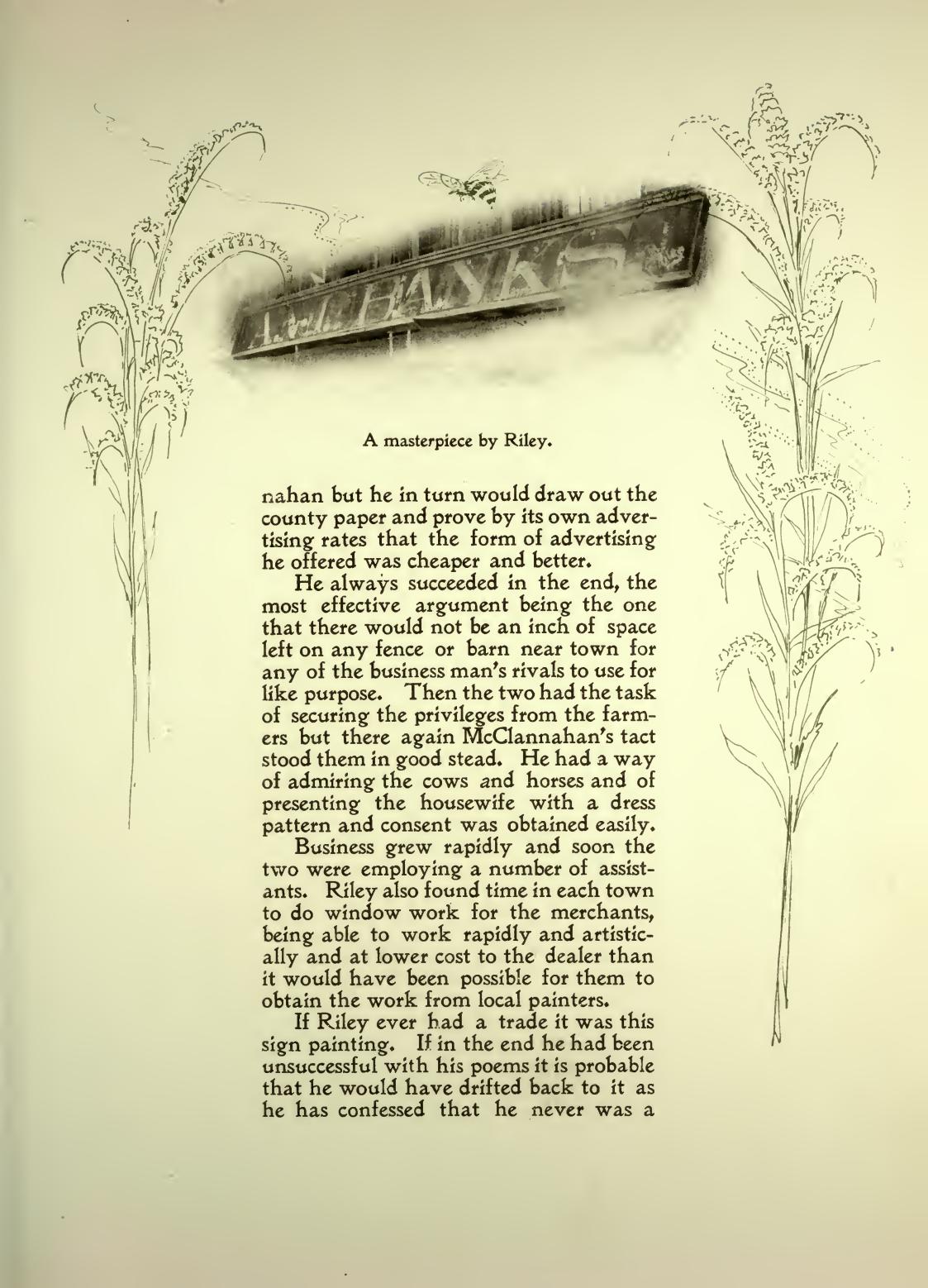
As actual labor the business was hard work—too hard work for one of Riley's build, as he has said himself.

"I can still remember," he has said, "standing on a ladder on the sunny side of one of the big barns and working in the heat until the perspiration ran down my face like rain and my arms seemed ready to break from weariness. You can have no idea of the physical labor of sign painting. Fences were not so bad as barns. On the latter we used to rig a temporary scaffolding, often using a farm wagon for the foundation and building the superstructure in the flimsiest manner possible."

McClannahan was a wonderful solicitor, according to Riley. When the advertising wagon came to a new town he would get one of the local papers and find the biggest advertisers. Then he would go to the business man and say:

"You evidently are the most wide-awake man in this town. Now we have been painting advertisements on barns, fences and rocks for patent medicine firms and we know what we are saying when we tell you that such advertising is the most remunerative in the world, especially because once paid for it lasts for years. Now there are eight roads leading out of this town and we will put your ad. in artistic style on every one of the barns and fences for three miles out of town for just so much money."

The business man generally protested vigorously at the price named by McClan-



A masterpiece by Riley.

nahan but he in turn would draw out the county paper and prove by its own advertising rates that the form of advertising he offered was cheaper and better.

He always succeeded in the end, the most effective argument being the one that there would not be an inch of space left on any fence or barn near town for any of the business man's rivals to use for like purpose. Then the two had the task of securing the privileges from the farmers but there again McClannahan's tact stood them in good stead. He had a way of admiring the cows and horses and of presenting the housewife with a dress pattern and consent was obtained easily.

Business grew rapidly and soon the two were employing a number of assistants. Riley also found time in each town to do window work for the merchants, being able to work rapidly and artistically and at lower cost to the dealer than it would have been possible for them to obtain the work from local painters.

If Riley ever had a trade it was this sign painting. If in the end he had been unsuccessful with his poems it is probable that he would have drifted back to it as he has confessed that he never was a



newspaper man in any sense. Although afterwards connected with various papers always was in the capacity of verse writer.

He might have attached himself to some sort or other of theatrical company as he had decided ability. This afterwards was displayed in his platform career as a reader of his own works. On such occasions the real value of his poetry gained an additional worth in the manner of its presentation to the audience.

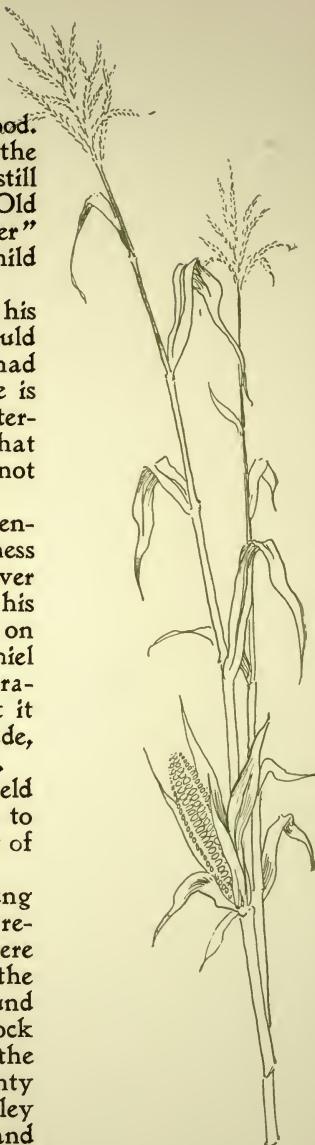
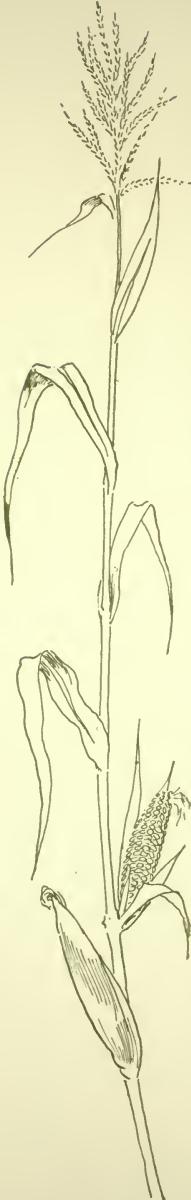
From sign painting Riley went to newspaper work, the writing of verses, advertisements and paragraphs for Greenfield and Anderson papers. All his work in this connection will be the subject of separate discussion in these pages. He did not win immediate honor—did not win recognition even after his poems had secured publication.

It is said in Greenfield that Riley was known as an erratic employee. It is asserted, with probably unintentional exaggeration, that he never continued in that work more than three weeks until he found his real work in life.

A reflection of his boyish circus days, when the three quarts of pins were accu-



OLD MASONIC HALL,
Scene of Riley's early theatrical efforts.



mulated, is found in his young manhood. Recollections of his performances in the old Masonic hall in Greenfield are still preserved. He is remembered as "Old Man Probst" in the "Golden Farmer" and as "Troubled Tom" in the "Child of Waterloo."

The assertion is generally made in his native town that "Jim" Riley would have made another Mansfield if he had not taken to writing poetry; so there is another probability entered in the interesting, if unprofitable, discussion of what the poet might have been if he had not been a poet.

During unemployed days in Greenfield Riley encountered acts of kindness on the part of his friends which he never forgot and which he well repaid in his days of prosperity. It is related that on one occasion his life was saved by Daniel Conwell. This is probably an exaggeration of the service rendered him, but it was such as to claim Riley's gratitude, and in later days Riley remembered it.

There is many a man in Greenfield who has had occasion to be thankful to fate for granting him the opportunity of befriending the young poet.

One incident of his life in early young manhood there which is still vividly remembered by him. He and a chum were on the street late one evening when the father of the other young man found them and proceeded summarily to lock them up in a hotel room. During the night the citizens of Hancock county formed in a mob to lynch a negro. Riley and his chum made a rope of sheets and slid down from the window to see the hanging. The spectacle left a deep impression on the poet's mind and one which still retains force.

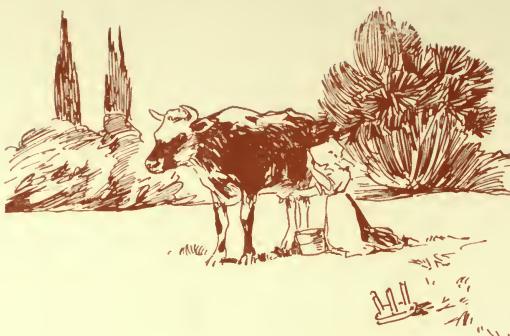


“Tel now it's Fame 'at writes your name.”

RILEY began writing during his childhood. His earliest recollection of an attempt at versification goes back to a disappointment of childhood. One Valentine day came and found the little boy unprovided with pennies to buy the cards which all children exchanged.

His brothers and sisters were spending their pennies for gaudy paste boards with doggerel verses and Riley determined he would send some if he had to make them. He drew pictures of the people to whom his valentines were to be sent and colored them. Then he wrote his own verses underneath the pictures.

If one of the recipients had been endowed with prophetic power he would



have saved the missive which the mails brought him and would be the possessor of Riley's first verses.

One of the first poems for which he received money was that entitled "Destiny," published by Donald G. Mitchell, editor of "Hearth and Home." Riley has said that he was in the clouds when he received a check from Mitchell—"Ike Marvell"—whom he knew by reputation, and a note praising the verses which had been accepted. The effect on him was to start him immediately mailing every scrap of poetry he had to the "Hearth and Home."

His first success did not presage a second. The entire bundle was returned, the disappointment being sweetened by a letter from Mitchell telling the young poet that the work pleased, but could not be used, for the reason that the magazine was to be abandoned.

"A most excellent reason," as Riley said.

At this time he was working on the Greenfield News, a weekly paper which



The Morris Pierson homestead where Riley wrote
some of his early verse.



had been bought in 1874 by William R. Hartpence, about the time Riley was busily engaged in sign painting. It was after the receipts from this industry diminished that Riley abandoned it and turned to newspaper labor. Even in this latter occupation he clung to the advertising phase.

He had been doing desultory work on the News for some time when the manager decided to put him in charge of the local field, which, being interpreted, means that he went out after small items and solicited advertisements. In the latter undertaking he was not the greatest success imaginable. A rival paper of older standing took the greater share of the small town's advertising away from him.

Riley then fell back on his "poetic genius" and did the advertisements in verse, with better results, commercially, although the literary skeletons left in his closet in consequence of that business career are frightful.

One skeleton arises now and shakes its bones to the following accompaniment:

"Of all the stores the cheapest one
"Is the grocery store of Carr & Son."

Another advertisement began with:

"Hootsy-toosy, I declare!
"See the parties everywhere."

Riley went up and down Main street and up and down other streets with these jingles for meat men, shoe men, grocery men and others. It was a sad fate for a young man who was perfectly convinced by this time that he could write poetry, but who was unable to convince other people.

Some of his contributions in the non-commercial line of poetry appeared occasionally in the "poet's corner" of the





“Where the cows slept on the cold, dewy grass.”



News and of papers in neighboring towns. The general opinion in Greenfield, based largely on the advertising verses, was that Riley's poetry was "awful rot." The young poet's friends were not backward in telling him that such was the case.

"Your verses certainly are awful, Jim," said the editor of the rival paper to him one day.

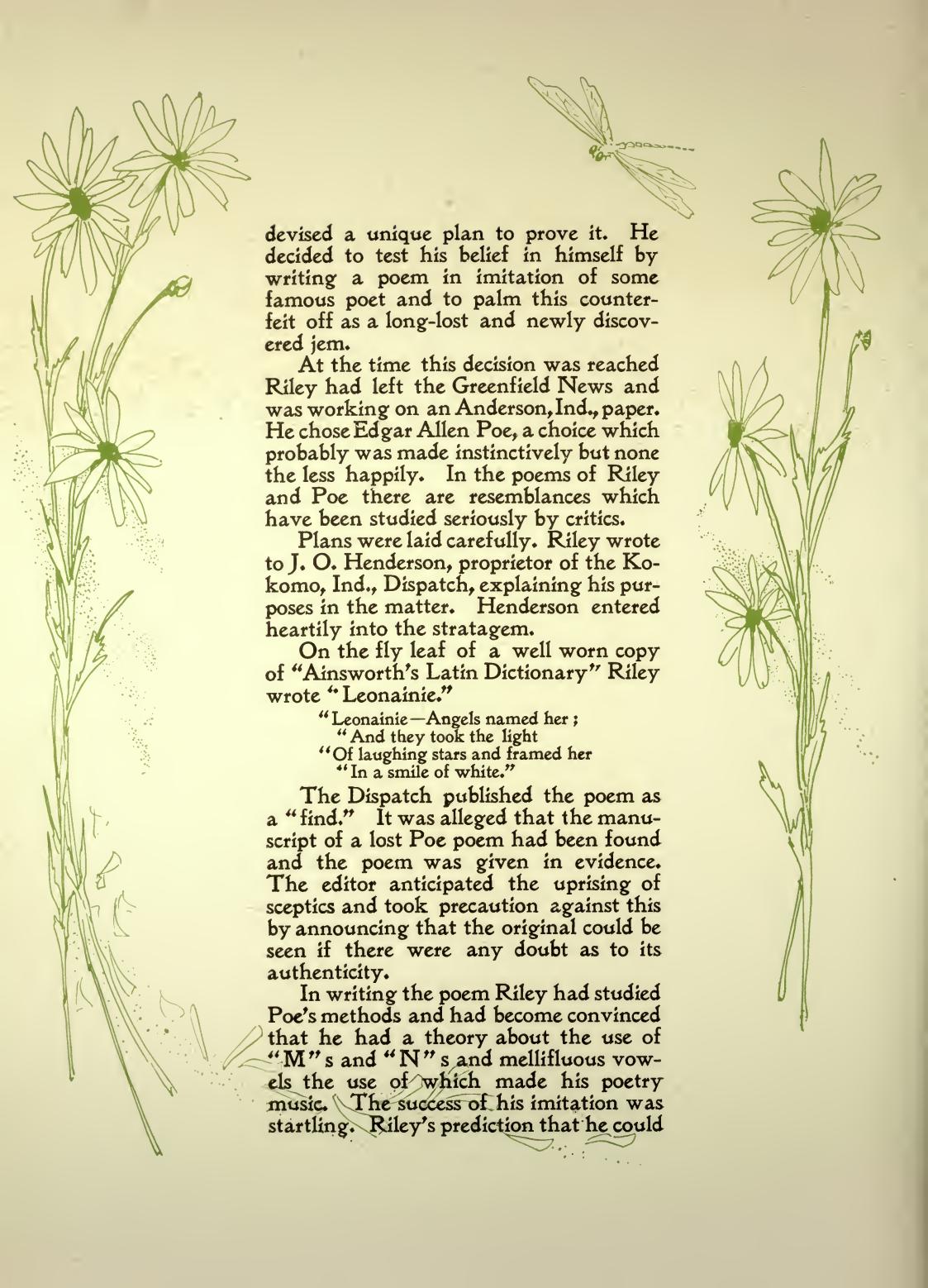
Riley afterwards numbered that man among his friends, but not at that particular moment.

"If your poetry is so good," they would say to him, "why don't the magazines take it?" This was before "Destiny" had been published, and Riley had no way of answering his critics except by falling back on the defense which has been used for time immemorial "that the publishers didn't know good poetry."

"I can write as good poems as good poets have written," Riley declared to his friends. He not only believed it, but he



“Way back in the airy days.”



devised a unique plan to prove it. He decided to test his belief in himself by writing a poem in imitation of some famous poet and to palm this counterfeit off as a long-lost and newly discovered jem.

At the time this decision was reached Riley had left the Greenfield News and was working on an Anderson, Ind., paper. He chose Edgar Allan Poe, a choice which probably was made instinctively but none the less happily. In the poems of Riley and Poe there are resemblances which have been studied seriously by critics.

Plans were laid carefully. Riley wrote to J. O. Henderson, proprietor of the Kokomo, Ind., Dispatch, explaining his purposes in the matter. Henderson entered heartily into the stratagem.

On the fly leaf of a well worn copy of "Ainsworth's Latin Dictionary" Riley wrote "Leonainie."

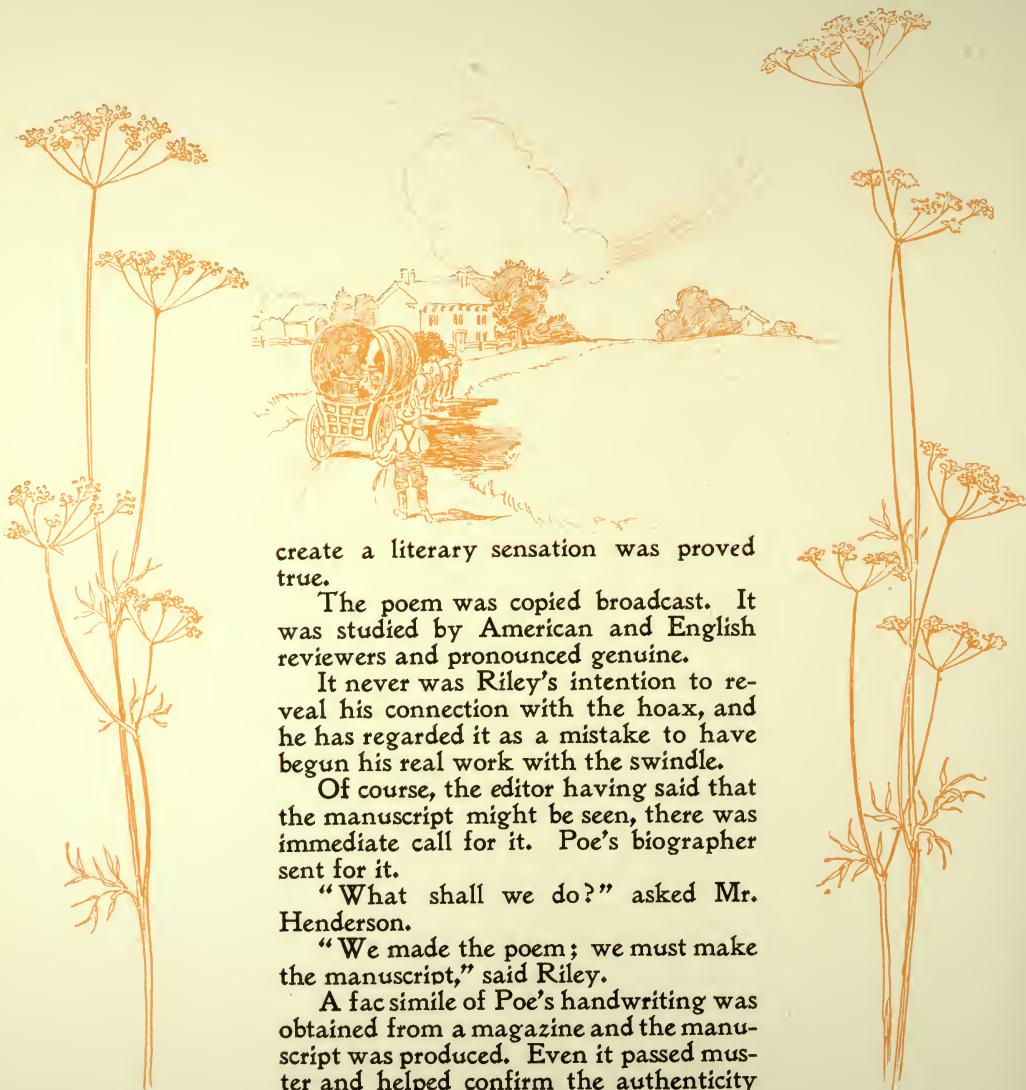
"Leonainie—Angels named her;
"And they took the light
"Of laughing stars and framed her
"In a smile of white."

The Dispatch published the poem as a "find." It was alleged that the manuscript of a lost Poe poem had been found and the poem was given in evidence. The editor anticipated the uprising of sceptics and took precaution against this by announcing that the original could be seen if there were any doubt as to its authenticity.

In writing the poem Riley had studied Poe's methods and had become convinced that he had a theory about the use of "M"s and "N"s and mellifluous vowels the use of which made his poetry music. The success of his imitation was startling. Riley's prediction that he could



“The husky, rusty russel of the tassels of the corn.”



create a literary sensation was proved true.

The poem was copied broadcast. It was studied by American and English reviewers and pronounced genuine.

It never was Riley's intention to reveal his connection with the hoax, and he has regarded it as a mistake to have begun his real work with the swindle.

Of course, the editor having said that the manuscript might be seen, there was immediate call for it. Poe's biographer sent for it.

"What shall we do?" asked Mr. Henderson.

"We made the poem; we must make the manuscript," said Riley.

A fac simile of Poe's handwriting was obtained from a magazine and the manuscript was produced. Even it passed muster and helped confirm the authenticity of the poem, but finally the exposure came. At the same time Riley lost his position on the Anderson "Democrat,"



The Sugar Creek Ford.



and the two events have been connected as proof that the one caused the other. It is not likely that the morals of a country newspaper were violently offended because one of its employes palmed off a hoax on the literary world. However that may be, Riley was lost to country journalism soon after the episode.

His next venture was in Indianapolis. The real poet had come out of this attempt to prove his equality with the accepted men of letters, and it was beginning to be recognized that a man who could write well enough to deceive critics into believing he was Edgar Allan Poe might write well enough to be accepted as a poet himself.

There had been a few before this, who, reading "What the Wind Said," published in 1877 in the Kokomo Dispatch, had been willing to grant it.

"Mr. Riley deserves to be considered a poet," said one reviewer when he read the following from this poem:

"I muse today in a listless way,
"In the gleam of a summer land;
"I close my eyes as a lover may
"At the touch of his sweetheart's hand."

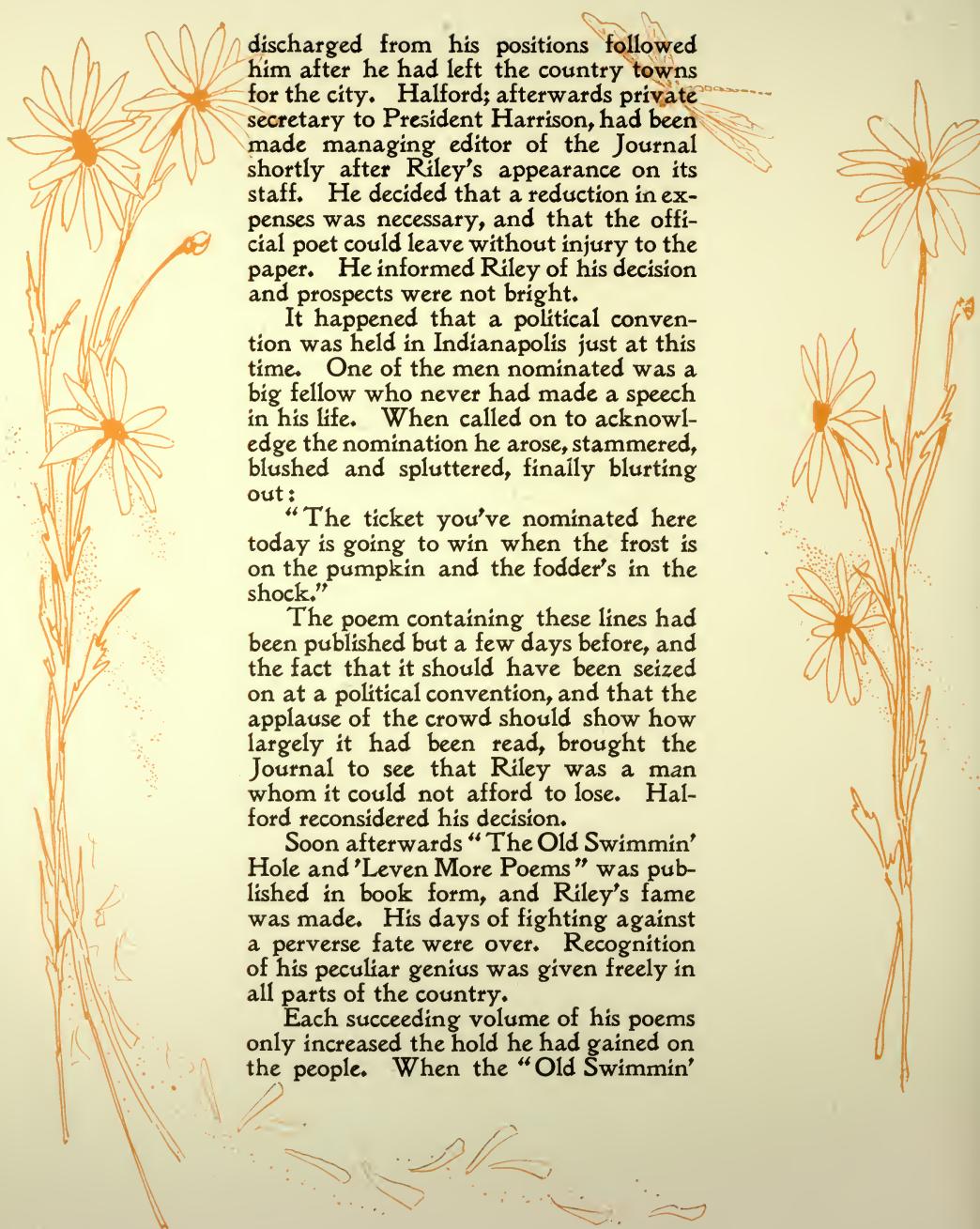
This was one of the first real poems of Riley, buried as it was in the columns of the little country newspaper. His first dialect poem, "The Farmer Dreamer," also had appeared by this time, the first of his work to secure recognition outside of his native state.

With these experiences Riley went to Indianapolis, which has been his home ever since and the scene of his literary labor. E. B. Martindale, then proprietor of the Indianapolis Journal, is described by Riley as his "first literary patron."

The poet's peculiar fate of getting



"Timber thick enough to sorto' shade the crick."



discharged from his positions followed him after he had left the country towns for the city. Halford, afterwards private secretary to President Harrison, had been made managing editor of the Journal shortly after Riley's appearance on its staff. He decided that a reduction in expenses was necessary, and that the official poet could leave without injury to the paper. He informed Riley of his decision and prospects were not bright.

It happened that a political convention was held in Indianapolis just at this time. One of the men nominated was a big fellow who never had made a speech in his life. When called on to acknowledge the nomination he arose, stammered, blushed and spluttered, finally blurting out:

“The ticket you've nominated here today is going to win when the frost is on the pumpkin and the fodder's in the shock.”

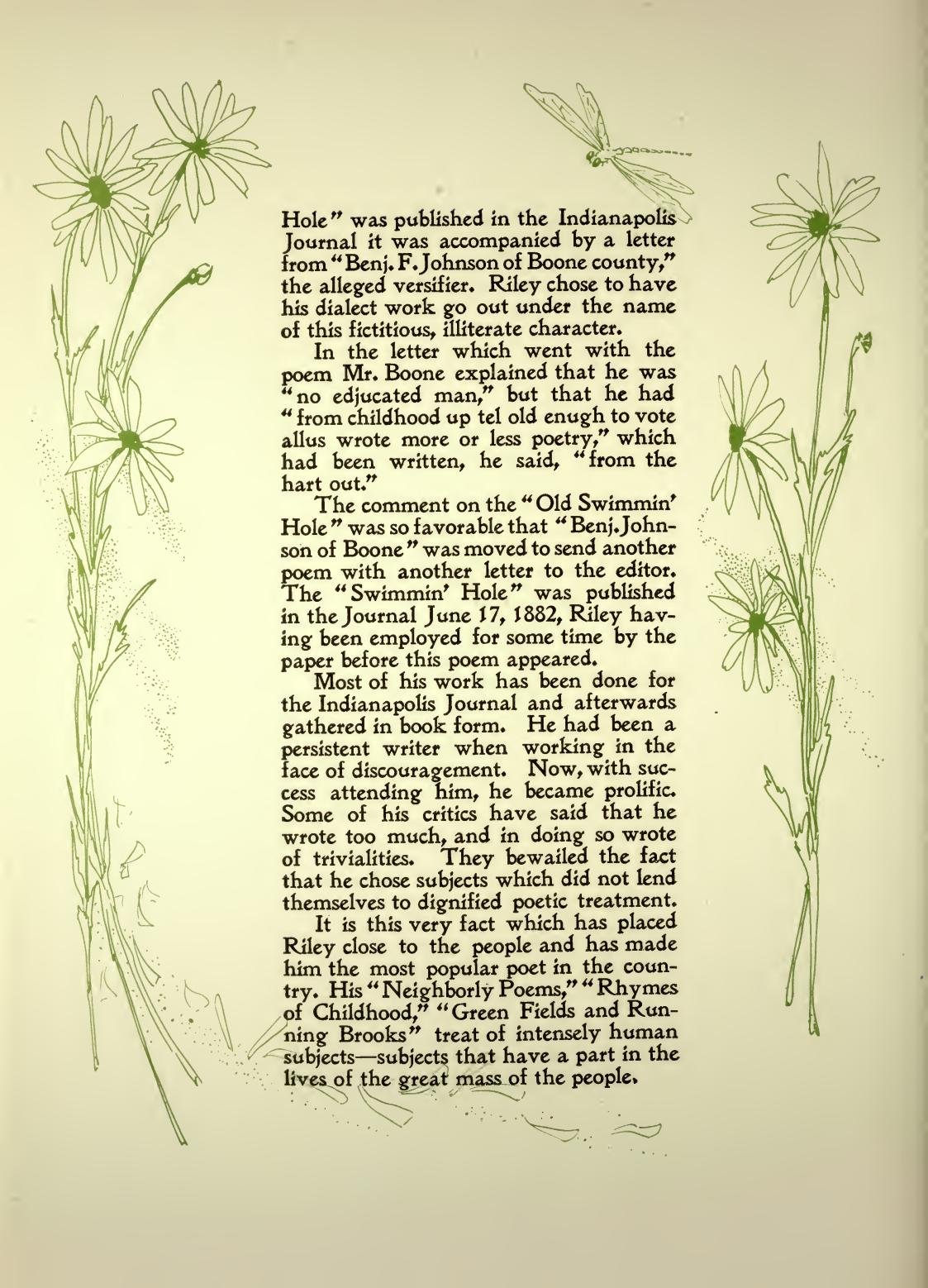
The poem containing these lines had been published but a few days before, and the fact that it should have been seized on at a political convention, and that the applause of the crowd should show how largely it had been read, brought the Journal to see that Riley was a man whom it could not afford to lose. Halford reconsidered his decision.

Soon afterwards “The Old Swimmin’ Hole and 'Leven More Poems” was published in book form, and Riley's fame was made. His days of fighting against a perverse fate were over. Recognition of his peculiar genius was given freely in all parts of the country.

Each succeeding volume of his poems only increased the hold he had gained on the people. When the “Old Swimmin’



The new swimming hole.



Hole" was published in the Indianapolis Journal it was accompanied by a letter from "Benj. F. Johnson of Boone county," the alleged versifier. Riley chose to have his dialect work go out under the name of this fictitious, illiterate character.

In the letter which went with the poem Mr. Boone explained that he was "no educated man," but that he had "from childhood up tel old enough to vote allus wrote more or less poetry," which had been written, he said, "from the hart out."

The comment on the "Old Swimmin' Hole" was so favorable that "Benj. Johnson of Boone" was moved to send another poem with another letter to the editor. The "Swimmin' Hole" was published in the Journal June 17, 1882, Riley having been employed for some time by the paper before this poem appeared.

Most of his work has been done for the Indianapolis Journal and afterwards gathered in book form. He had been a persistent writer when working in the face of discouragement. Now, with success attending him, he became prolific. Some of his critics have said that he wrote too much, and in doing so wrote of trivialities. They bewailed the fact that he chose subjects which did not lend themselves to dignified poetic treatment.

It is this very fact which has placed Riley close to the people and has made him the most popular poet in the country. His "Neighborly Poems," "Rhymes of Childhood," "Green Fields and Running Brooks" treat of intensely human subjects—subjects that have a part in the lives of the great mass of the people.



"Writ from the hart out."

RILEY'S work has been called ephemeral because dialectic. Not all is of this character. The poet has shown that he can use the purest English and use it with as great effect as any living writer. No pen ever became famous simply because of dialect and no great work lost value in after years on account of it.

The Hoosier dialect which Riley used in his poems is slowly disappearing, but without effect on the poems. They are understood and appreciated by those who never heard the dialect spoken and will be when all possibility of hearing it has passed out.

His poems will live because they are genuine human documents that speak to people in language which they can understand. So long as there is a remembrance



of the civil war, there will be eyes which will grow moist when they read "Good-by Jim, Take Keer of Yourself,"—the words spoken by the old Hoosier farmer too old to enlist, to his son, too young to go and yet willing.

So will they when they read "Arma-zindy"—the story of the small Indiana girl who struggles to fill the place of her soldier father, killed by an accident coming home from the war.

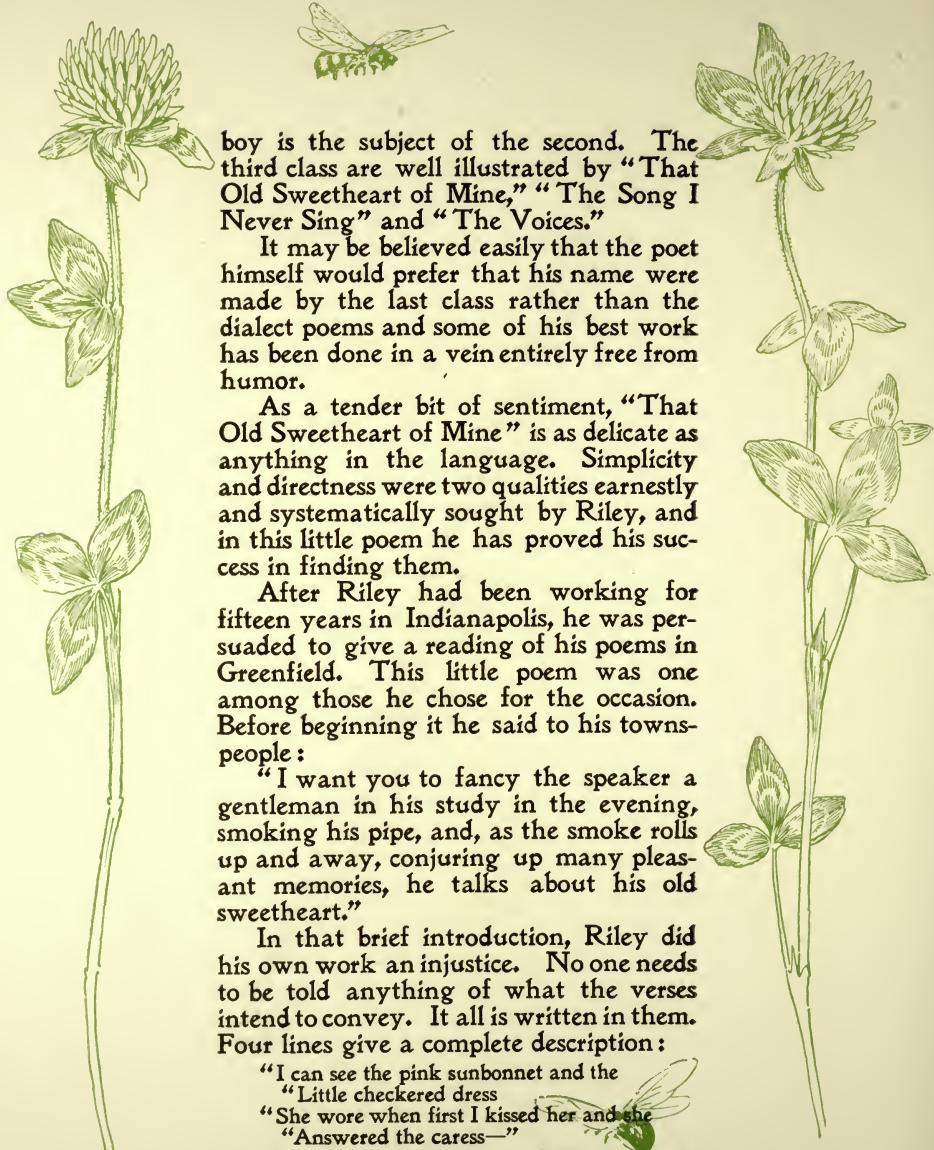
"Jes' a child, one minute—nex'
"A woman grown, in all respec's
"And intents and purposuz
"At's what Armazindy wuz."

Riley intended this poem, which was placed in a collection with seventy others and published in 1894, to be a sort of Hoosieric epic, and such it is.

Riley's poetry naturally divides itself into three classifications—dialect, childhood and so-called serious poems. It cannot be an arbitrary division, as a number of poems may be shifted from one class to the other. Under dialect might be grouped those works which deal with the life of the Hoosier farmer. The Hoosier



“With tangled tops where dead leaves shakes.”



boy is the subject of the second. The third class are well illustrated by "That Old Sweetheart of Mine," "The Song I Never Sing" and "The Voices."

It may be believed easily that the poet himself would prefer that his name were made by the last class rather than the dialect poems and some of his best work has been done in a vein entirely free from humor.

As a tender bit of sentiment, "That Old Sweetheart of Mine" is as delicate as anything in the language. Simplicity and directness were two qualities earnestly and systematically sought by Riley, and in this little poem he has proved his success in finding them.

After Riley had been working for fifteen years in Indianapolis, he was persuaded to give a reading of his poems in Greenfield. This little poem was one among those he chose for the occasion. Before beginning it he said to his townspeople :

"I want you to fancy the speaker a gentleman in his study in the evening, smoking his pipe, and, as the smoke rolls up and away, conjuring up many pleasant memories, he talks about his old sweetheart."

In that brief introduction, Riley did his own work an injustice. No one needs to be told anything of what the verses intend to convey. It all is written in them. Four lines give a complete description :

"I can see the pink sunbonnet and the
"Little checkered dress
"She wore when first I kissed her and she
"Answered the caress—"

There is a note of Longfellow in the "Voices." Riley occasionally feigned the characteristics of other poets—not in imi-



THOMAS CARR.
"Tuba Tom" of the "New Band."



tation, simply a touch that recalled another man's art. Such a touch has been found in :

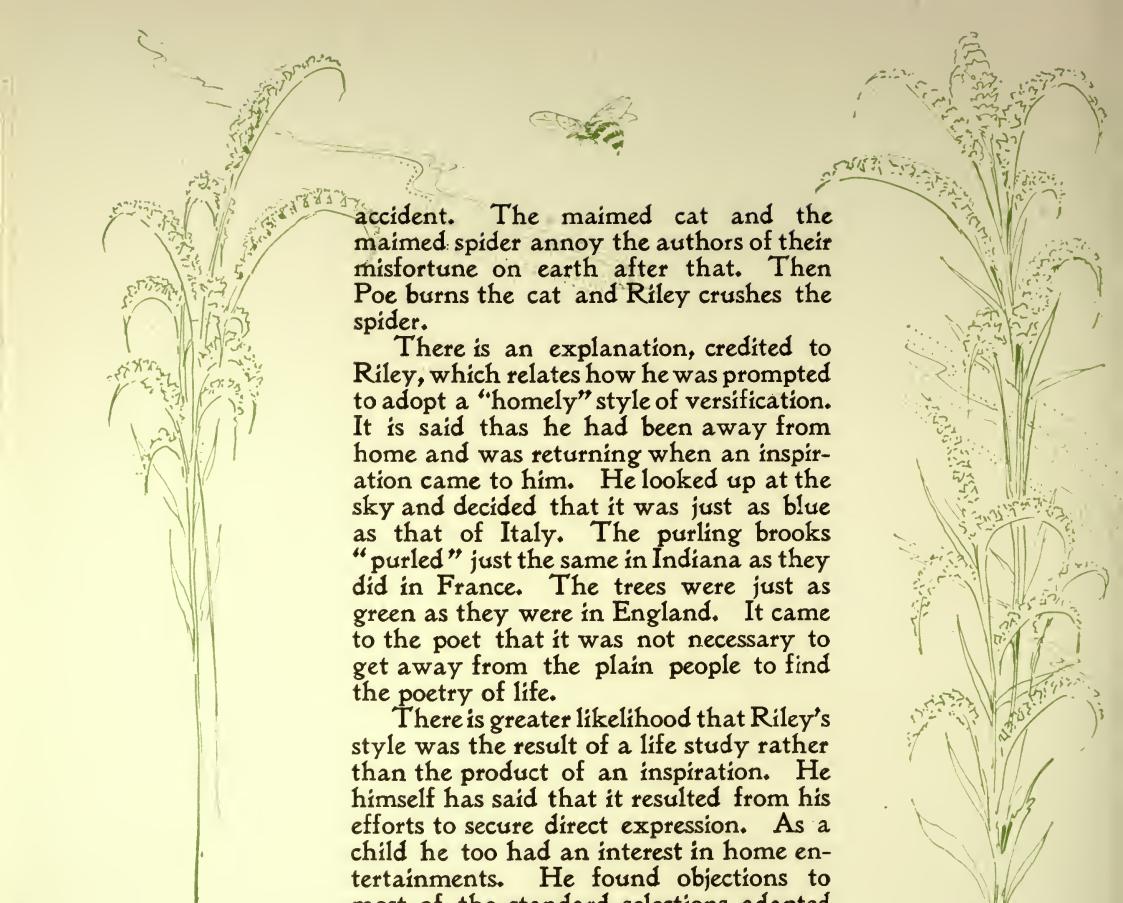
“Down in the night I hear them ;
“The voices—unknown—unguessed—
“That whisper, that lisp, and murmur,
“And will not let me rest.”

The characteristics which Riley and Poe had in common have been mentioned. Without them it is possible that Riley would not have found it an easy matter to have deceived the country with “Leonainie.” A study of this resemblance has been made in the case of Poe “Black Cat” and Riley “Tale of a Spider.”

One critic asserted that if a reader not familiar with either Poe or Riley were given the “Scenes from Politan” by the former and the “Flying Island” by the latter, he would pronounce both to be of the same author. “The same similarity in conception and treatment is found in “The Black Cat” by Poe and the “Tale of a Spider” by Riley. There is one fundamental difference. Poe destroys the eye of the cat with fiendish glee. Riley destroys an arm of the spider by



“And the sunshine and shadow fell over it all.”



accident. The maimed cat and the maimed spider annoy the authors of their misfortune on earth after that. Then Poe burns the cat and Riley crushes the spider.

There is an explanation, credited to Riley, which relates how he was prompted to adopt a "homely" style of versification. It is said that he had been away from home and was returning when an inspiration came to him. He looked up at the sky and decided that it was just as blue as that of Italy. The purling brooks "purled" just the same in Indiana as they did in France. The trees were just as green as they were in England. It came to the poet that it was not necessary to get away from the plain people to find the poetry of life.

There is greater likelihood that Riley's style was the result of a life study rather than the product of an inspiration. He himself has said that it resulted from his efforts to secure direct expression. As a child he too had an interest in home entertainments. He found objections to most of the standard selections adapted for such purposes then. He wanted a natural expression and he found this impossible in most cases on account of the inverted construction used by the writers. To remedy matters he wrote his own verses but concealed the ownership from the audiences. He feared that the selection, if known as his, would fail to meet appreciation.

He wanted his characters to say things naturally, and it required hard work to bring this result. He has disclaimed praise for invention.

"I simply report," he has said.

He has used the material stored away in his memory since boyhood and the



“Tell of the old log house—about the loft and the
puncheon floor—”



The "New Band."

material which he has gathered since his real work began. He never was in direct and daily contact with the farmers, but yet in close enough association to have his mind impressed by their characteristics. Quaint and curious sayings have been reported to him by friends, and he has made it a system to go in and out among the farmers, getting their viewpoint and method of expression.

The results of this study are shown in his dialect poems. The homely philosophy acquired in this way is well exemplified in the "Thoughts fer the Discouraged Farmer."

This farmer has the usual forboding about the weather and the possibility of crops being ruined, but he looks at the fields and the sky, the birds and the beasts, and his philosophy is contained in the lines:

"Ort a mortal be complainin' when dumb animals rejoice?"

"On the Banks o' Deer Creek" is another poem containing this philosophy of life—a picture of laziness and happiness



“And rag weed and fennel and grass is as sweet as
the scent of the lilies of Eden of old.”



watching the snipes and killdees, worter bugs and snake feeders.

"Soak yer hide in sunshine and waller in the shade—

"Like the Good Book tells us—where there're none to make afraid."

A separate class under the dialect poems might be made, including those in which Riley treated subjects and places which were a part of his life in Greenfield. "Jap Miller," for instance, is living near Greenfield now, still "down at Martinsville," just as he was when Riley wrote the poem. He still "talks you down on tariff."

"He's the comicalist feller ever tilted back a cheer
"And tuck a chaw of tobacker kinder like he
didn't keer."

They say in Greenfield that "Jap Miller aint worn \$9 worth of clothes since that poem was written. Wants to stay jest like the character."

There also is "I Want to Hear the Old Band Play," which Riley wrote after a return from one of his trips from Greenfield when he found that the "old band" had been supplanted by a new organization, the "Adelphians," with better instruments and brighter uniforms.

"The new band maybe beats it, but the old band's
what I said—
"It allus 'peared to kind o' cord with somepin' in
my head."

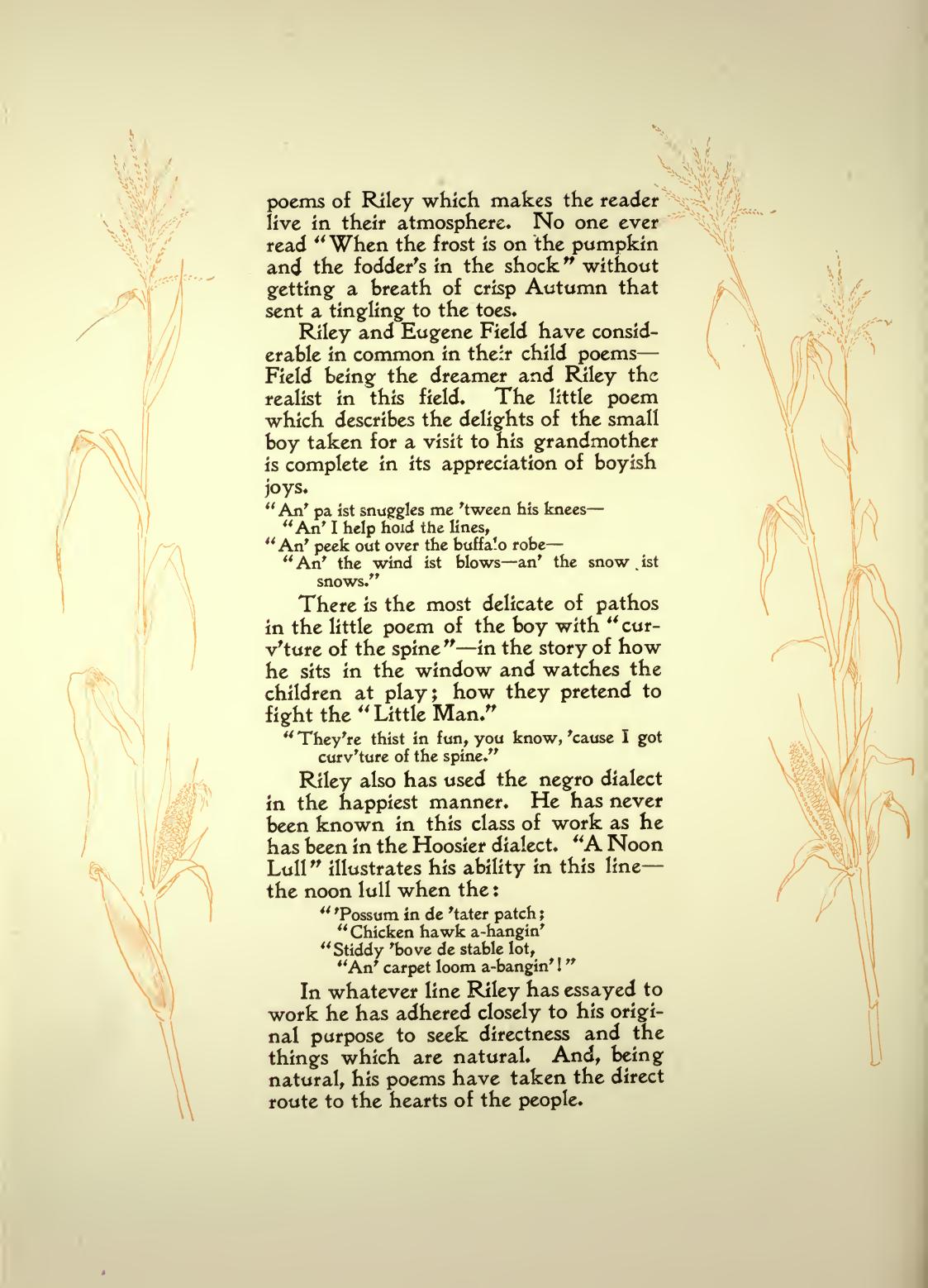
No poem of Riley's is better known than the "Old Swimmin' Hole." He could not have chosen a theme which would find readier response in every man's heart than this, which pictures the delights of the cool river, spreading out a little to form a basin under the trees, reached by tramping down the dusty lane and across the fields.

There is that quality in all the rural





“He jest natcherly pined, night and day,
“Fer a sight of the woods, ev a acre of ground
“Whare the trees wasent all cleared away.”



poems of Riley which makes the reader live in their atmosphere. No one ever read "When the frost is on the pumpkin and the fodder's in the shock" without getting a breath of crisp Autumn that sent a tingling to the toes.

Riley and Eugene Field have considerable in common in their child poems—Field being the dreamer and Riley the realist in this field. The little poem which describes the delights of the small boy taken for a visit to his grandmother is complete in its appreciation of boyish joys.

"An' pa ist snuggles me 'tween his knees—

"An' I help hold the lines,

"An' peek out over the buffa'o robe—

"An' the wind ist blows—an' the snow ist snows."

There is the most delicate of pathos in the little poem of the boy with "curv'ture of the spine"—in the story of how he sits in the window and watches the children at play; how they pretend to fight the "Little Man."

"They're thist in fun, you know, 'cause I got curv'ture of the spine."

Riley also has used the negro dialect in the happiest manner. He has never been known in this class of work as he has been in the Hoosier dialect. "A Noon Lull" illustrates his ability in this line—the noon lull when the :

"'Possum in de 'tater patch;

"Chicken hawk a-hangin'

"Stiddy 'bove de stable lot,

"An' carpet loom a-bangin'!"

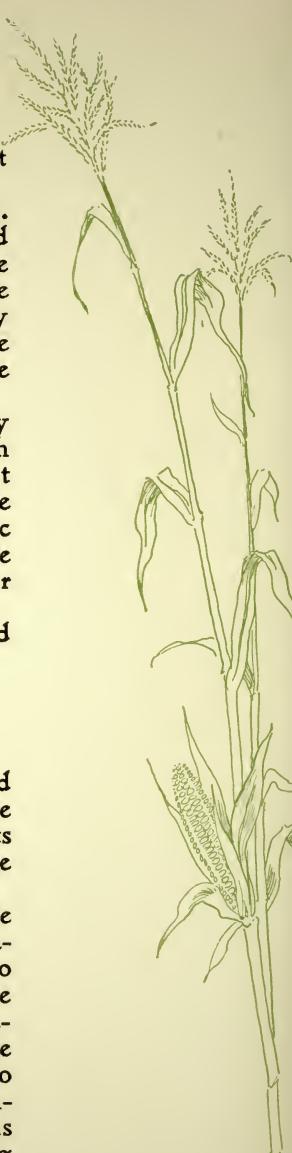
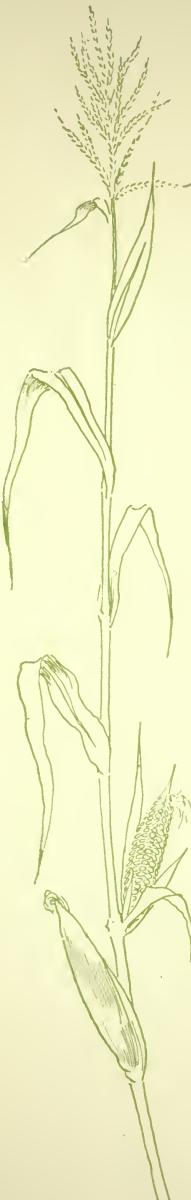
In whatever line Riley has essayed to work he has adhered closely to his original purpose to seek directness and the things which are natural. And, being natural, his poems have taken the direct route to the hearts of the people.



“Fer forty years and bet-
ter you have been a
friend to me.”

CHEN Riley came to prosperity he purchased the home in Greenfield in which his family had lived—not the home in which he was born. This has been remodeled and is used, but not by the poet himself. He has remained a bachelor.

Time is doing a great deal to remove the landmarks which are portrayed in his poems. Visitors still can find the old swimming hole. The town has grown



out towards it, but there still is a short walk across pastures to reach it.

The old one has been abandoned. The boys who go swimming have found a larger basin a hundred yards from the one of Riley's day, but the Brandywine is dwindling, and, sorrowful as it may seem to a lover of Riley's poetry, the boys of his native town soon may have no place for swimming.

The national road, the great artery along which the nation pumped strength into the west, has become the Main street of Greenfield, as it has in many of the towns through which it passed. Electric cars have taken the place of the prairie schooners with which Riley was familiar in boyhood.

Kingry's mill has disappeared and with it:

“The old miller, with his cheer,
“Leanin' at the winder sill;
“Swoppin' lies an' pokin' fun,
“An' jigglin' like his hoppers done.”

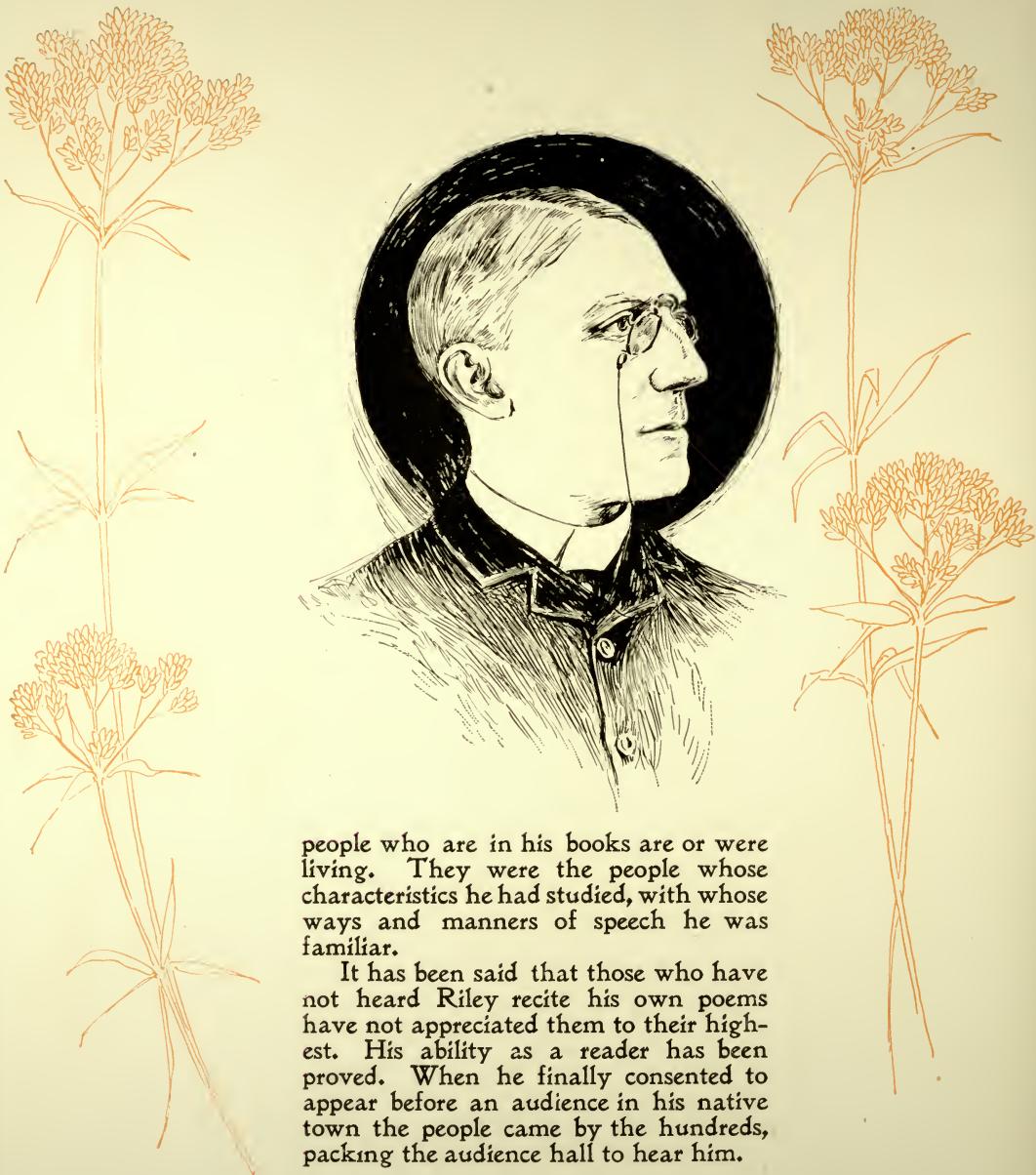
Both the old band and the new band have gone. The old Masonic hall, the scene of many of Riley's amateur efforts in drama and recitation, stands at one corner in the town.

Four miles out of the town is the Sugar Creek ford, associated with Armazindy. It is related that Riley refused to have this poem illustrated, although the publishers wanted a frontispiece. He preferred that it be “plain readin'.” The difficulty was solved by a friend who happened to catch a snap shot of a country girl, just such a girl in appearance as Armazindy might have been, coming across the stepping stones of the ford, steadyng herself with a pole.

Fate has dealt with kindlier hands to the characters. As has been said, the



ELMER SWOPE,
An early acquaintance of Riley.



people who are in his books are or were living. They were the people whose characteristics he had studied, with whose ways and manners of speech he was familiar.

It has been said that those who have not heard Riley recite his own poems have not appreciated them to their highest. His ability as a reader has been proved. When he finally consented to appear before an audience in his native town the people came by the hundreds, packing the audience hall to hear him.



It was a touching tribute to the esteem in which he is held in Greenfield.

"Shucks, we don't really appreciate Riley," said a citizen there. "We all call him 'Jim,' and we all know him, and maybe we don't really know how great a poet he is. But there's one thing certain. He doesn't get out a book that everybody here doesn't read."

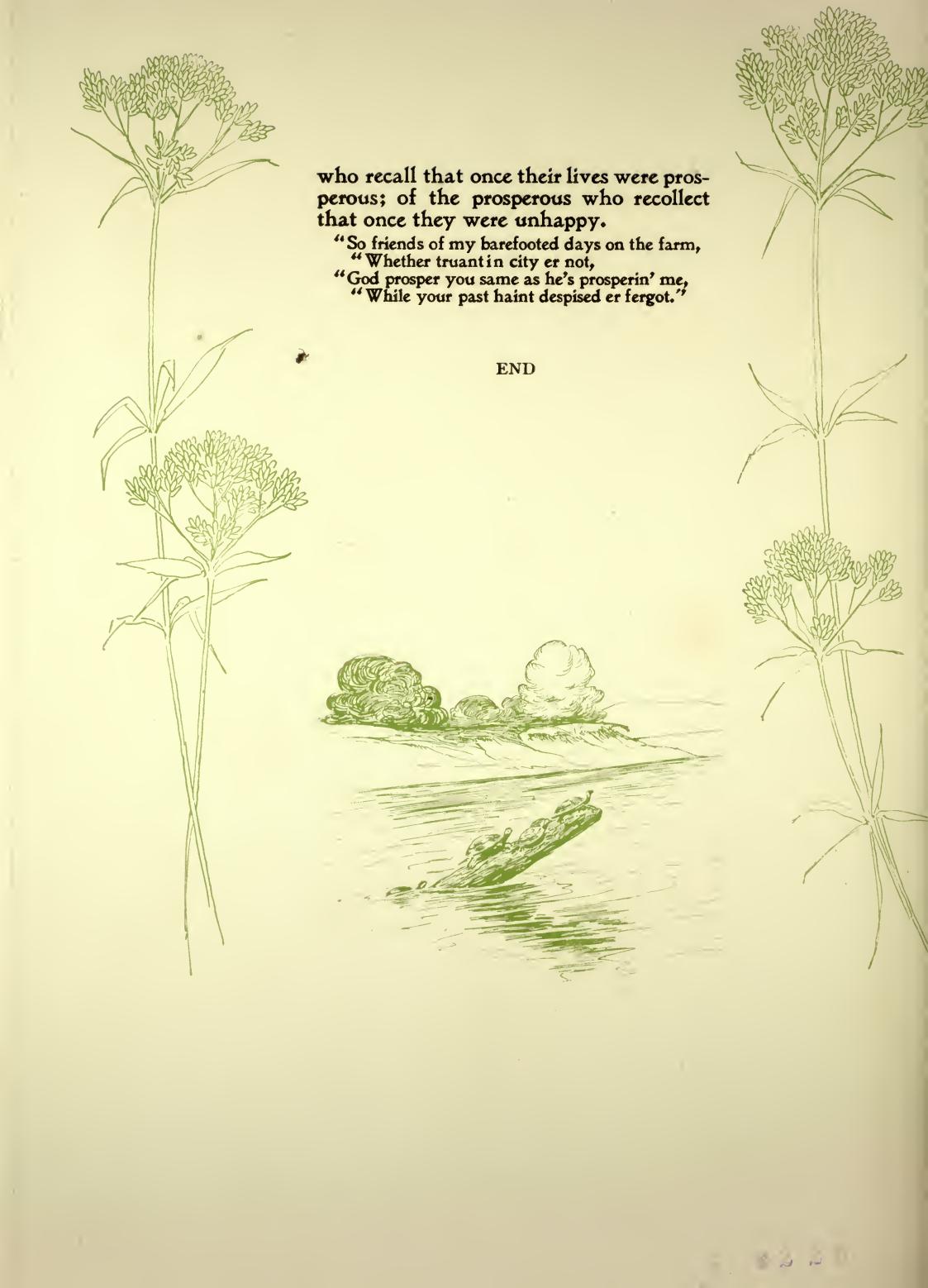
There has been great kindness shown on both sides, between Riley and his townspeople. In his younger days he found willing, helping friends among them. He in turn, now that he has reached prosperity, has not forgotten these friends. There is many a man in Greenfield who can tell of a ready hand held out in trouble. Riley has seen some of his old acquaintances through expensive sickness, has paid physicians' bills and has provided the necessities of life.

Riley's lecturing tours of recent have not been numerous. Neither has his literary activity been so great. As he still is a man in the flush of his genius, it may well be accepted that he has yet his work to do. He is not a burned-out fire which has displayed all the brilliance intended that it should.

The work of the poet in the future may be depended on to rival and excel that which he has given the world in the past. He is not a poet that people forget. He would not have to write another line to remain constant in their hearts as the popular American poet.



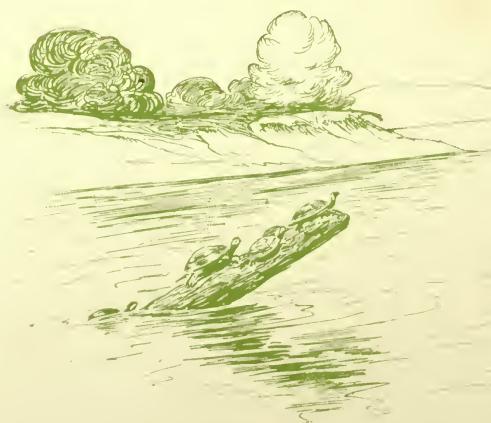
However, it is assured that this popularity will be increased by the future product of his pen. Riley will always be the poet of the man who remembers that once he was a boy; of the city dweller who remembers that once his life was in the country; of the unfortunate



who recall that once their lives were prosperous; of the prosperous who recollect that once they were unhappy.

“So friends of my barefooted days on the farm,
“Whether truant in city er not,
“God prosper you same as he’s prosperin’ me,
“While your past haint despised er fergot.”

END





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